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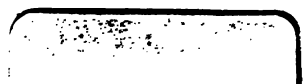
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THE MAN
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1st Sin



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The Man Who Lived

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The Man Who Lived

By
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Author of "The Ring"



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FOREWORD

This novel, the Author's first attempt, has already appeared serially between the years 1906-7, in a leading paper, having won a prize in a competition for the best story submitted.

PART I.

M.L.

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CHAPTER I.

SUNDAY morning, in some parts of London, is characterised not only by an especially deafening clamour of church bells, but by a particular smell savouring of Windsor soap and the best clothes of second-rate shop people.

Into the area of this distinctive odour (with which as time neared the dinner-hour the peculiarly offensive scent of boiled potatoes had already begun to mingle), there came, on an early spring Sabbath, a certain man. He was seated in a hansom cab, and the clatter of the horse's hoofs sounded on the wooden pavement of the Addison Road, West Kensington. At intervals the driver urged the jaded animal into a canter, for the traffic was scarce. The occupant of the cab was a small man, short and spare, with very square shoulders. He wore a blue serge suit, and a red knitted tie against a shirt of a lighter blue, and on his head a soft grey felt hat. Beneath its covering he had a well-shaped head, thatched with medium-coloured hair, and his face was rather square-shaped, burnt brown by the sun. Across his upper lip grew a straight reddish moustache. His features were not noticeable: the eyes small, brown and rather deep set, the nose straight, the mouth moderately sized, and thin-lipped. Only a particularly observant person might have noticed more. For a student of human nature, here, firstly, was a man who placed comfort of apparel before the usages of society; next, one whose expression held a history. Though the man's face was singularly passive, his eyes, insignificant enough in their shape, colour and size, yet were the windows of a mind above the average. The observer would recognise a fellow-observer of more than common intelligence. The eyes spoke. They said: "We have

looked on most phases of human nature in most corners of the globe. We belong to a man of action, who is at the same time a thinker. Behind us the brain has known physical suffering and some trouble. But in compensation, we have looked on the vastest scenes of Nature, and can never quite lose the remembrance of an immense satisfaction and rest."

Unmistakably English, yet with a wider knowledge of the world than is possessed even by most Englishmen, the man had but lately travelled across a continent in returning from British Columbia to his own country, with as much thought for the length of the journey, as any other individual might waste in crossing London. Now, his attitude as he sat in the hansom, with legs outstretched and apart, and arms tightly folded, was characteristic. His eyes gazed into the distance. Presently he made a movement, and lifted the trap-door in the roof of the cab.

"You've got to try and go faster," he said, betraying no impatience, but speaking slowly and incisively.

The cabman cracked his whip and the horse moved forward with impetuous jerks, as though it were controlled by clockwork and the mechanism were out of order. They turned into Sinclair Road, then passed through several bisecting streets. Eventually the cab stopped before some red-brick mansions, and the occupant descended. He stepped down to the kerb slowly and with some care, and the reason for this caution was evident, when after an injunction to the cabman to wait, he limped painfully into the vestibule of the building. There were several flights of stairs for him to ascend. When he reached the top and found himself confronted by a green door, the upper half of which was veiled from within with yellow muslin, he was panting from his exertions. He rang the bell, and leant against the distempered wall. The summons brought no immediate response, so he rang again, pressing the electric button for several seconds. Still there was no answer. His lips assumed a rigid line, and he wiped his brow with his handkerchief, then once

more attempted to attract the attention of the inmates of the flat. A figure within pulled aside the yellow curtain and peered at him through the glass. Then the door was opened. Before him stood a woman of about thirty, dressed in a dark-coloured coat and skirt, and a blouse that terminated at her neck in a mannish linen collar. Her figure was flat, and she was rather taller than the man. The salient points of her face, which was plain, but nevertheless shrewd and kindly, were an unusually long jaw and a pair of intelligent light hazel eyes.

"She is rather like a horse," thought the man, and, removing his hat, said interrogatively: "Miss Courtfield?"

"That's my name," she answered.

"Allow me to introduce myself," he continued, in his slow incisive tones, while he still held his hat in his hand. "I am Sidney Hawe. I have come from Jim Reesdale."

She held out her hand for him to shake and smiled with sudden friendliness.

"Very pleased to see you," she said. "Come in."

"Thanks." He entered a narrow passage, with doors opening off it on both sides.

"Jim's told us so much about you that I cannot feel you are a stranger," she continued briskly, as she closed the front door. "Maisie—my sister, you know—will be especially pleased to meet so great a friend of his. Come and be introduced. She's——"

"One moment," said Hawe, interrupting her. "May I see you alone? There's something particular I have to tell you."

"What's the matter?"

"I'll tell you," he repeated rather vaguely. Suddenly he leant his whole weight against the door behind him, and his shoulders drooped.

"Good gracious! are you ill?" said the woman, eyeing him sharply. "Whatever is the matter? See—come in here and sit down." She flung back a door and led the way. "It's only the kitchen," she added,

over her shoulder, "but that can't be helped. It's our servant's Sunday out. We've only got one sitting-room, and Maisie's in there."

Hawe followed her into the room, which had a clean and Sabbath air, and stood clutching with one hand the edge of the table.

"Please don't be alarmed," he said; "it's all right—only the stairs, and I've got rather a game leg. My knee—you know—I smashed it up a while ago—riding. Ah, thanks so much." She had pushed forward a chair and he sank into it limply, and rested his elbow on the table.

"It's nothing—really," he reiterated jerkily.

Miss Courtfield pushed a tumbler containing a little neat brandy towards him.

"There," she said, gently. "Take that."

He shook his head and smiled.

"Oh! no, thanks. I'm better without. It's a kind of inflammation, you know. Thanks awfully. Forgive me for being such a fool." He re-passed his handkerchief over his forehead, where there had stood beads of perspiration, then took a deep breath.

"The fact is," he said, after a moment, "I hardly know how to tell you the reason of my coming."

He began picking nervously at the wood of the table with his nails. The woman had taken another chair by the table and sat regarding him intently. To them both came the smell of roasting meat from the oven, and a sound of insistent ticking from a clock on the dresser.

"I've come on an unpleasant errand," said the man, suddenly speaking quicker than his wont; "to break some bad news to you, Miss Courtfield."

There was no answer, but it seemed to him that the attitude of the seated figure became rather more still.

"Something's happened to Jim."

"An accident?"

"Yes—run over—by a motor-bus near Hyde Park Corner, this morning." The words came spasmodically.

"Good God!" she breathed.

Her crossed hands lay on the table, and he remarked their size and strength, the long, capable interlaced fingers and the bony knuckles. After another pause—"Was he——?" she began.

Hawe interrupted her, lifting his head and looking into her eyes.

"No," he returned, answering the unspoken question. "They picked him up unconscious and took him to St. George's Hospital. There was nothing but a letter addressed to me in his pocket, so they sent for me. He could just speak when I saw him, and he told me your address and asked me to come and fetch you . . . It's a bad business—simply devilish. He—he's all smashed up, poor chap. The thing went right over him."

The woman gave a muttered exclamation, and turning away her face covered her eyes with one hand. Hawe remained silent. At last——

"He and Maisie are engaged to be married," she said gruffly. "Did he tell you that?"

"Yes."

"But we're delaying. He wants to see her, of course."

She rose hastily from her chair, and after fumbling for a handkerchief in her coat pocket, blew her nose loudly. "I—I'm simply devoted to him too," she said, as though in extenuation of any apparent weakness.

Once more she stood looking down on Hawe's bent head.

"It must be awful for you as well," she added, and laid an awkward hand for a moment on his shoulder. Then—"I'll have to break it to Maisie. Tell me how long——?"

"They don't expect he'll live through the day," answered Hawe, renewing his picking at the wood of the table. "One can hardly wish he may——"

"Is he in so much pain?"

"Yes."

The woman sighed sharply. "How can I tell Maisie?" she said with futile piteousness.

"It seemed his one wish just to see her," said Hawe. "She ought to go. But—you must prepare her. It's rather—shocking."

In the succeeding pause, a single chime, preceded by a slight whirring noise, came from the loud-ticking clock.

"His expression, you know," continued Hawe; "it's quite altered, somehow. And his head and face were cut about some—they've been bandaged."

"Ah! but it'll kill Maisie almost to see him like that," cried Miss Courtfield. "She hasn't the slightest knowledge of suffering. She's desperately sensitive and high-strung."

At the last word Hawe looked up apprehensively. For him it was synonymous with hysterical.

"You must try and persuade her to control her feelings as much as possible," he said in a firmer tone. "And she ought to judge about going, don't you think? There's my cab waiting downstairs."

"You're right," said the woman, and she moved reluctantly towards the door. "I'll go and tell her," she added without looking back. "Would you mind staying here?"

She opened the door, hesitated on the threshold, and passed through, leaving it ajar.

Directly she had disappeared Hawe drew a deep breath and then, as though on an impulse, yet with a certain furtiveness, stretched out his hand for the tumbler containing the brandy. It still stood on the table where she had placed it. In another moment he had drunk the spirit at a gulp. Then for several seconds he sat regarding the empty glass, with an odd little deprecatory smile on his lips.

CHAPTER II.

IN an adjoining room a fresh young voice had been singing, regardless of Sabbath observances, a snatch of an old popular song. The words drifted to Hawe through the half-open kitchen door :

"I wouldn't leave my little wooden hut for you—oo.
I've got one lover and I don't want two—oo.
What may happen there is no knowing,
If he ——"

Then the song ceased abruptly, and he heard the voice ask, "Who was it that came, Cecilia ?"

Hawe leaned forward in his chair and listened, but the reply did not reach him. Only, after a moment, there was a little light high laugh, and the same voice spoke again.

"What a queer time of day, anyhow, to pay a call !"

He could imagine an admonitory whisper, then a door slammed. He strained his ears, but could hear nothing further. The ticking of the clock on the dresser seemed to grow more insistent, more maddeningly loud. It filled the silence of the room. Hawe could feel it like the throbbing of a pulse. Suddenly, with a great spluttering, a saucepan on the stove boiled over, and there was immediately an unpleasant smell of burnt milk. The man started and gave vent between his teeth to an exclamation of annoyance. All his nerves were on edge. His surroundings irritated him hideously. It occurred to him—why should he not now take his departure ? He had come commissioned by a dying man, with a message of ill news to two women with whom he was quite unacquainted. The breaking of his tidings he thought had been almost the most hateful task he had ever been set to perform ; but

worse lay before him—to support, if not to essay to comfort them in their grief. Jim's girl—what was her name?—the one with the high voice he had overheard—Mamie—no, Maisie—Maisie, who her sister said was “high-strung,” would assuredly weep. If there was any sight he dreaded more than another, it was that of a woman in tears. How simple to take the present opportunity of making his escape. Perhaps it would be tactful, too, to relieve them of the presence of a stranger. In another instant the decision to go had formed in his mind. He picked up his hat from the floor and rose from his chair with a little grimace. His knee was still painful. He moved towards the door, and paused with his hand on the woodwork to listen.

Then, unexpectedly, from a room opposite the kitchen issued a girl. She stood before Hawe and looked into his face. Her hands were clasped over her breast, and her head drooped forward on a neck whose whiteness and slenderness were the first points he noticed. The face was a living appeal. The mouth curved downwards, with slightly parted lips, the nostrils quivering, the blue eyes wide with tears—all suggested to the man a picture he had once seen in an old gallery. He even found himself trying to remember the subject of the painting. Had it been a fair young Italian “Madonna Dolorosa” or an “Isabella with her Pot of Basil”? Or had it been some piteously human goddess of mythology, or merely the personification of an abstract “Supplication”? She spoke, and put his fancies to flight. It was not so much an ill-bred as a commonplace voice. Hawe felt it to be out of accord with the picture, but could not put a name to his reason for thinking so. If he had been a woman, he might have recognised the slightly suburban accent.

“Mr. Hawe,” said Maisie, “please will you take me to Jim?”

“Yes, if you wish,” he returned. “But won’t you and your sister go on first? There’s the cab I came in, waiting downstairs. I can take another immediately afterwards.”

He glanced questioningly from her to the older woman, who stood behind her.

Cecilia Courtfield shook her head.

"He would wish most to see you," she said to Hawe. "You must therefore go on first with Maisie. I'm not so important. I'll follow."

She spoke quite steadily and practically, and turned back into the room to fetch a coat for her sister.

The girl still stood before Hawe, half leaning now against the jamb of the door. "Oh! isn't there a chance?" she whispered suddenly. "He can't be going to die? Ah! Jim, Jim, Jim." She covered her face with her hands and he saw the tears trickling through her fingers.

There was nothing he could say. He put the cape that Cecilia brought round the girl's shoulders, and then stood away from her and said very gently, "Will you come?"

Miss Courtfield opened the front door and Maisie passed through it and began to run down the stairs. Hawe paused for a moment on the threshold. Then, "You will follow us?" he said rather helplessly.

"Yes," said Cecilia, "I'll follow you," and suddenly she gripped his hand in hers and wrung it.

He descended the stairs slowly, holding the banister rail, and joined Maisie at the bottom. In another moment they were in the waiting cab and had started. He regarded her profile. She had stopped crying and was gazing straight before her. He began to take note of her appearance. She had not stayed to put on a hat, and the fact gave him an unreasonable thrill of satisfaction. Her hair was light brown and wavy, and it grew low on her forehead. She wore it parted in the middle and gathered rather untidily on the nape of her neck into an arrangement tied with a bow of black ribbon. Her face was small, and in shape an almost perfect oval; the chin weak but pretty and the nose short and straight. The bodice of her dress was collarless, and showed above a transparent lace yoke a throat of exquisite lines. Round it she wore a necklace of

palpably imitation pearls. A vague solicitation for her entered Hawe's mind. It occurred to him that the air was chill and her throat uncovered.

"You ought," he said in his slow, incisive tones, "to fasten your cape at the neck. You will catch cold."

"Never mind," she answered, without looking at him. "It doesn't matter."

"If you please," said Hawe, and leaning in front of her, himself hooked the cloak with much care. The girl smiled at him tremulously.

"You're awfully kind," she said, and after that they did not speak. They reached St. George's Hospital, and he helped her to alight.

A few curious passers-by, in the hope of an excitement, stopped to stare at them, and were duly interested in Hawe's lameness. He could hear their comments.

"'E's 'urt 'is leg, and she's tikin' 'im to 'orspital."

"'Ow did it 'appen?"

"An accident?"

"You arx 'er."

"No-w, you."

He glanced at his companion, but her face was set, and she seemed neither to see the bystanders, nor hear their remarks.

She accompanied him blindly into the building, dimly heard his voice asking questions from someone within, knew that, as in a nightmare, they were traversing long corridors and wards, and realised nothing clearly till they passed behind a screen, and stood by an iron bedstead. Thereon, beneath the white coverlet, lay a figure that she did not recognise.

The face was shrunken and creased, seeming curiously unreal and resembling more a finely-painted mask than anything human. The eyes were closed. The forehead and jaw were bound with white bandages, against which the skin appeared a greenish-grey in colour. The outline of the limbs beneath the bed-clothes gave the impression of a body short and stunted. Yet the man she had come to see was, in her recollection, well-made

and tall. She turned to Hawe with the same appeal that he had first noticed showing in her eyes.

"Jim, I want to go to Jim," she said vaguely.

A nurse by the bedside touched the recumbent figure and spoke very clearly and gently. "They are here—your friends," she said.

Some inner mechanism seemed to lift the eyelids of the mask, and two vacant depths, circled each with a light-coloured iris, were revealed. The figure remained quite motionless.

"Since you were here, we have been obliged to inject morphia twice," murmured the nurse to Hawe. He left Maisie's side, bent over the still form, and spoke close to its ear.

"Reesdale—it's I—Hawe. I've brought Miss Courtfield."

The face of the man on the bed retained its mask-like rigidity.

"Reesdale," repeated Hawe a little louder; then again: "Reesdale."

"I want to go to Jim; take me to Jim," reiterated the girl in the background.

Consciousness dawned slowly behind the man's eyes. His down-drawn lips, which were rather darker yet of a uniform shade with the face, quivered very slightly.

"He'll speak in a minute," whispered Hawe, and stood with his hand holding the bed-rail, looking down on the figure.

"But this isn't Jim—not my Jim. Oh, won't you take me to him?" came again in a choking breath. Hawe turned to her, and took both her hands in his. "Yes, it is," he said gently. "You must try to be a brave girl." He felt as though he were dealing with a child. "There's a change, of course. But speak to him—come."

She advanced to the head of the bed, and stared down on the grey face. Her own was white and she panted as though she had been running. Her expression held a faint curiosity and a sickening horror. Her

blue eyes remained fixed, with a kind of fascination, on the light-coloured eyes below. Then Hawe's ears caught the faintest possible sound from between the dark lips. He bent his head and then glanced quickly at Maisie.

"Your name," he said. "He's trying to say your name. He knows you. Speak to him."

The girl's gaze remained riveted and she seemed powerless to utter a word. Hawe spoke again very slowly and gently. "Jim—do you recognise us?"

The lips made—"Yes—" like a sigh. The nurse, on the opposite side of the bed, forced a teaspoonful of some stimulant into the man's mouth, and he swallowed with a great effort. His arm and hand lay outside the coverlet, and for a few moments the fingers twitched. Then the hand dropped over, till the palm was uppermost, and the man tried feebly to lift it towards Maisie. His effort was useless and he groaned horribly. His expressionless gaze turned to Hawe.

"Give him your hand," said the latter eagerly. "He wants to hold it—don't you see?"

"Yes," murmured the nurse, "that's it! He wants to hold her hand."

The girl plucked at the fastenings of her cloak and shook her head.

"It's all right," said Hawe soothingly; "don't be frightened. Give him your hand." He laid his own, gently, over one of her wrists. She snatched it away and with a violent sob fell on her knees by the bed, and hid her face on her arm. She wept noisily between disjointed sentences.

"Take me away—take me away—I can't bear it. No—no—it isn't real. Take me away."

Hawe glanced distractedly at the nurse, who came round and touched Maisie's shoulder.

"Be quiet, please," she said. "You really must be quiet."

Then Cecilia arrived.

The girl staggered to her feet and into her sister's arms.

"It's horrible—horrible," she sobbed. "I can't touch it—it isn't real. Take me away."

The man on the bed stirred and moaned and muttered.

Hawe, with a sudden exclamation clapped his hands to his ears, and bit his lip, staring at the floor. Even thus he was conscious of Cecilia's murmured words, "Hush, Maisie dear, hush!"

Then he gave his attention once more to the nurse, who was bending over Reesdale. She looked up at him, across the figure, and spoke coolly and authoritatively.

"You had really better take your sister away. She is very much upset, and the patient can't stand it."

He nodded and turned to Cecilia.

"She had better go," he said in a low tone.

"But," began the woman, and looked yearningly towards the bed.

"All right," said Hawe. "Very well. I'll see her home. You can stay." He drew the girl's arm through his own.

"Will you?" said Cecilia, scanning his face. "Oh! God bless you!" She looked from him to Maisie and let her hand linger on the girl's shoulder.

"There, there, dear; go with Mr. Hawe," she whispered.

Then she turned to the bed.

Maisie's whole frame was still shaken by great tearing sobs. Half led and half supported by Hawe, she moved away.

CHAPTER III.

SILENTLY, and as quickly as possible, he conducted the girl away from the hospital. When they were once more seated in a hansom he had summoned, there was time for him to experience a sense of dull amazement at the happenings of the last half-hour. He felt helpless in face of this woman's utter lack of self-control. Yet, at the same time, he was wonderingly aware of an immense desire to offer her sympathy and consolation. He told himself that her fear at the horror they had witnessed was unworthy, that her weakness was contemptible, that her abandonment to grief was almost disgusting. Yet it gradually dawned on him that in his innermost mind he felt for her no blame, no contempt, no disgust, but alone an overwhelming pity. Where was his dread of a feminine emotional outbreak? Where his desire to escape from tears he had foreseen? What had happened to revolutionise his sensations? He was not a man given to introspection, but he marvelled now at his own coolness in face of such difficulties. And still the girl wept, and wept, and wept. She held a sopping handkerchief to her eyes, and her hands were wet with tears that trickled down to her wrists. The sound of her continued sobs was nerve-wearing, but Hawe (who with some experience of men and women had never before seen anyone cry so violently) felt strong with the wish to soothe and comfort her. Notwithstanding these promptings, however, he could find no word to say, but sat speechlessly pondering what he would do when they reached their destination. The situation for him was so unique, that his immediate course of action required much deliberation. They arrived, and he braced himself for movement, alighted, and almost lifted the girl from the step of the cab.

The driver, a red-faced, kindly-looking man, appeared much concerned and volunteered assistance.

"I'm rather lame," confessed Hawe, "and I don't know how I shall get her up the stairs. I'd be much obliged. How about your horse?"

The man looked up and down the deserted street.

"There 'in't no peeler round, sir, so I'll leave my 'oss, though we're not supposed to," he replied, and swung himself down off his perch. "Bobbies and 'all-porters and all that uniformed lot harn't never about when they're wanted," he continued with a fine scorn. The situation, which for him held an element of pleasing novelty, rendered him talkative. He slipped a strong arm through Maisie's, and they passed through the entrance and began to ascend the long stone stairs. The girl, but for her continued sobs, might have been unconscious. Without the support of the two men, she would have fallen to the ground.

"Poor lidy!" said the cabman, regarding her, then glancing across at Hawe, "'As she 'urt 'erself, sir?"

"No—much upset—went to see a friend at the hospital—in a very bad way—an accident," returned the other between panting breaths.

"'Orrid. I know. Don't 'old with 'orspitals, myself."

A pause, while they breathed on a landing; then the continuation:

"She did tike it bad, poor thing. There, lidy, for Gawd's sake, don't you cry so."

Hawe stumbled suddenly at a step.

"You oughter 'ave some one 'elpin' you, yourself, sir!"

"I'm all right," was the reply from between clenched teeth.

"Which floor, sir?"

"Top."

"S'elp me! Come on."

They were there at last. The cabman rang the bell. A recollection dawned upon Hawe.

"That isn't any good; there's no one at home," he said blankly.

M.L.

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"'In't you got a latchkey, sir?"

"No."

The cabman whistled and they stared at each other, conscious of a serious *contretemps*.

"P'r'aps the lidy's got a latchkey."

Hawe was quite certain that such a possession would be one of the last things for Maisie to have about her person.

"We'll have to smash the glass," he said.

The driver grinned, well pleased with the suggestion, but showed no consuming inclination to put it into practice.

"We 'in't got nothin' to do it with," he said.

Hawe wrapped his handkerchief in a little wad round his fist, left Maisie to the support of the cabman's arm, and, resting one hand on the wall, hit out with a strong blow from the other at the upper part of the door. There was a smashing and tinkling of broken glass, and his fist went through the tight-drawn yellow muslin on the inner side.

"Blimey!" said the cabman with congratulatory emphasis, while Hawe through the opening pulled back the latch and rendered the entrance clear. He then returned to his consideration of the girl.

"Thanks," he said to the cabman, and drew generous payment from his pocket. "Good day. Much obliged to you."

He and his companion had passed within, and the door had slammed before the driver recovered from his surprise. The latter eventually retraced his way downstairs, muttering of a "rum go," and a "blimed queer cove."

Hawe, meanwhile, had arrived at a mental conclusion. When the weaker sex was unduly agitated or suffering from an overwhelming grief, he believed that its members usually retired to bed. This, anyhow, was exactly the opposite course of procedure that would be taken by a fellow man in trouble; therefore, to judge by a contrary standard, it should be the right thing to do for a woman. Unhappily, Maisie was in no condition to

judge of her own impulses, and it therefore remained for him to waive convention and himself attend to her wants. The first confronting difficulty was his total ignorance of the rooms in the flat. He opened the first door he saw, on the right of the passage, and found it led into a sitting-room. He tried another and discovered the bath-room. Yet a third led to the kitchen, which he might have remembered. His fourth attempt was at last successful. He walked into a small, square room, the space of which was monopolised by a bed and a chest of drawers. There was barely passage-way between the two articles of furniture. The room was further crowded by a corner washing-stand and a cane-bottomed chair.

Hawe supported the girl to the bed, removed her cloak gently with one hand, and then laid her head back on the pillows. There was an eiderdown quilt, and he drew it over her body and patted it into comfort, then stood for a moment looking down on the prostrate figure.

Maisie lay shivering from head to foot and still convulsed with sobs. Watching her, he felt a horrible anxiety.

"Oh! please try to stop crying," he said suddenly, for the first time addressing her. "If you go on like this you'll make yourself ill."

At his words, she only seemed to weep more frantically like an hysterical child. She made no attempt now to hide her face, and he saw it flushed and piteously distorted, the cheeks drenched with tears, and her fair hair tangled about her eyes. He was dismayed and uncertain what to do next.

"Can I get you anything?" he ventured again. "A brandy and soda? Some sal volatile? Or tea? Would a cup of tea pick you up, do you think?"

She took not the faintest notice of his enquiry. He paused a moment longer, regarding her thoughtfully, then left the room and closed the door. With his fingers resting on the handle, he pondered the question of a stimulant, came presently to a decision, and made

his way once more to the kitchen. Here, he glanced round its ordered emptiness, noticed that the clock on the dresser was still ticking with irrepressible vigour and its hands pointing to three o'clock, and that the smell of burnt milk remained in the air. He gave a little sigh, removed his coat and laid it on the table. Then he went to the stove, and found a kettle that already contained some water. But the fire behind the bars of the grate appeared to have dwindled to a black and forbidding mass of coal and ash. He poked it gingerly but without effect, and turned his attention to search for wood and paper. He opened several cupboards, discovered in one some crockery, and selected a cup and saucer and a teapot, in another some boot brushes and blacking, and in yet another several mysterious tins and jars, but nothing combustible. He conducted the search coolly and methodically, without allowing himself to despair. Eventually he came across a wooden box, which apparently contained cakes of soap. Of these he gleefully emptied it, and broke the receptacle into several pieces. Then he realised that each of the cupboard shelves was neatly lined with newspaper. So, first removing all that stood thereon, he became possessed of some, and prepared to revivify the fire. It was a long and arduous business. He blackened his hands and burnt his fingers with lumps of coal that retained an unexpected heat. He used a score of matches and inserted insidious scraps of blazing paper and splinters of wood, with a sense of exasperation. After some poking and stirring, he was at last rewarded by a permanent glow of heat, and hastened to place above it the kettle. Then he proceeded to look for some tea. By an inspiration he opened first a tin canister that he found on the mantelpiece. It contained what he wanted, and he shook the leaves into the teapot that stood ready.

"Come," he thought, "we are progressing."

The water, however, seemed to take an eternity to boil. As he waited, there occurred to him an idea. He would render the tea that he intended for Maisie more stimu-

lating by the addition of a little brandy. He accordingly searched, found a labelled bottle, and placed it beside the cup ready for use. When the kettle began to sing he removed it with joy, poured the water on the tea, and found himself confronted with yet another difficulty. He had forgotten the milk. This mistake threatened, in face of triumph, to spoil all. At the thought he felt himself grow hot, but retained his wits sufficiently to place the teapot on the stove, that its contents might stew, while he recommenced his labours. High and low, in cupboards, on shelves, into jugs and cups and tins he looked, but without success. There was not a drop of milk. He stood at length in the middle of the kitchen, and surveyed his surroundings almost despairingly. Then, by chance, his glance fell on a corner of the room, where on the floor stood a saucer. In his eagerness he held his breath and advanced towards it. It contained milk—milk whose surface was somewhat smutty—milk that was undoubtedly intended for the cat, but nevertheless *milk*. He picked up the saucer and emptied its contents with great care and a feeling of immense relief into the teacup. Nothing remained but to pour out the tea, to add the brandy, and to carry the steaming cupful to Maisie.

He paused outside the bedroom door and knocked. His summons elicited no response, and he entered. The girl lay on her side as he had left her.

"Miss Courtfield," he began, "I have brought you a cup of tea. You'd better take it. It'll pick you up."

There was no reply. He advanced to the bedside, and once more stood looking down upon her. She lay very still with closed eyes, breathing deep and regularly, fast asleep.

For a moment Hawe, with a thought of his wasted efforts, pondered the advisability of waking her; then, as though sensible of his presence, she stirred slightly and caught her breath in a little sobbing sigh. His regard became full of a pitying solicitude. He placed the cup on the chest of drawers and stole very quietly from the room.

CHAPTER IV.

As he stood once more in the passage, a sound at the front door attracted his attention. Someone stood without on the landing, and, after an instant's apparent hesitation, rang the bell. Hawe drew back the latch, and beheld Cecilia Courtfield. His sense of humour was momentarily stirred by the thought that, after an acquaintanceship of three hours, he should be giving admittance to the owner of the flat.

To her, however, the idea never seemed to occur. The gaze that she fixed on Hawe held nothing but a despairing grief, and as she entered, she spoke vaguely as though dazed with trouble. "Thank you so much. I forgot to take my latchkey. How did you get in?"

She stood in the passage and began to remove a pair of brown kid gloves.

"I took the liberty of smashing a pane of glass in the door," he replied, his tone matter-of-fact, his eyes serious and commiserating. "I'm very sorry. There seemed no other way."

"All right," she returned.

There was an awkward silence.

"Reesdale?" ventured Hawe questioningly.

"It's over," she answered, and turning from him, marched into the sitting-room and sat down heavily on a chair.

He followed her. Seldom before in his life had he felt so utterly nonplussed and ill at ease. Standing just within the room, he plunged his hands in his pockets and stared first at her and then at his own boots. The desire to escape recurred and filled his mind. After another interminable moment, he felt impelled to speak. The sound of his own voice reached

him oddly. "I'm horribly sorry, you know—I can sympathise." She did not answer, but sat twisting her gloves fiercely.

"I think," continued Hawe, "that perhaps—if I can do nothing more—I mean—I had better go."

The expression of his impulse was a relief. He backed a step. Cecilia looked up quickly.

"No," she said. "Please don't. One minute." She rose and confronted him. The gloves fell from her lap to the floor. She lifted her hands to her head and removed her hat, a beribboned and feathered affair, which seemed strangely out of accord with the rest of her attire. She held it before her, regarded it, and prodded the crown viciously with a couple of hatpins.

"One minute," she repeated; then in a low tone asked, "Where's Maisie?"

"She is lying down," said Hawe, "When we got here I thought the best plan would be to put her to bed. Now she's asleep—exhausted, I fancy. I meant her to take something—a sort of pick-me-up, don't you know. So I made her a cup of tea, but——" Hawe suddenly remembered his shirt-sleeves, and paused. An insane sense of amusement swept over him and passed. "I believe I left my coat in the kitchen," he said gravely. "Excuse me," and he went to fetch it.

In her turn she followed him.

"Please stay a little while," she said. "I want to speak to you—to thank you for all you've done." She placed her hat on the table, among the assortment of crockery, and sank into a chair. "Do sit down," she continued. Then as he obeyed her, she leant towards him, her hands clasped in her lap.

"You *have* been a good sort to us," she said.

"Oh, nonsense," muttered Hawe, pulling his moustache.

"It isn't," proceeded Cecilia, her strong-minded tones quavering slightly. "It isn't nonsense. There's not another man in London who would have done so

much for two women he didn't know. Thank you a thousand times. I am more grateful than I can say."

The man's face grew a fiery red, and he cleared his throat and recommenced the examination of his boots.

"It's nothing—nothing at all," he murmured. "Anything I could do——"

"I know what you're thinking," she went on rapidly. "All your kindness was performed for Jim's sake. All I can say is, he was lucky in his friend."

Hawe stirred in his chair, and fixed a sudden watchful regard on her face, apprehensive beyond anything of having to deal with another tearful woman. After a moment of panic, he spoke collectedly.

"I only hope *we* may become better friends, Miss Courtfield."

"Thank you," she said. "I think we should. The last few hours in which I have known you, have been to me like a lifetime. I feel as though our acquaintance had the standing of years—and yet, what do we know of each other? I want to tell you about myself and my sister."

She paused. Hawe once more cleared his throat and said, "Please do."

"Maisie and I have lived alone in this little flat for five years," she said. "My father was a clergyman, in a Sussex village. He died when I was twenty-five and my sister was sixteen. Maisie was then at school in Gloucestershire. She had to leave. You see, from having been fairly comfortably off, we were reduced to poverty. We each had a pittance. We found our joint incomes would be just enough to live on. For a year we stayed with a married aunt, who lived just out of town at Highgate. I became a sort of amanuensis to her husband, who was a business man—something in the City. I took lessons in typewriting and shorthand, and did secretarial work for him. Maisie, poor child, helped our small cousins with their lessons. Then she met Jim. He was a mere boy—only nineteen; like

ourselves, an orphan, and he was struggling to start on a journalistic career."

"I know," broke in Hawe. "That must have been about the time when I first knew him too."

"Was it? What a coincidence! Well, he and Maisie fell in love with each other. Perhaps he confided in you. They were foolishly young, of course. I never thought it would last, but they were serious enough. Their attachment was the cause of our quarrelling with our aunt, and the forming in my mind of a determination to live independently. It ended in our taking this flat. We furnished on the hire system and settled down. Our relations disapproved, but were kind enough to give me openings to work. I continued the secretarial business, and took in typewriting as well. Maisie helped me with the home work, and attended to the housekeeping. At first, you see, we felt too poor to keep a servant, so Maisie did everything—cooking, housework, and typewriting at spare hours. She was wonderful. Does it bore you to hear these details?"

"No," returned Hawe; "please go on."

"Well, all this time Jim stuck to us. I grew to regard him as a dear younger brother. He and Maisie were devoted. But I would not then allow them to call their understanding an engagement. They were so young, and beside his little income he had nothing and was without assured prospects. It seemed all right, though. The boy—you know what he was—so clever, so ambitious—bound to get on."

"He had a taste for writing, I always thought."

"No one could help observing it. His aim was to one day write a novel and make a name for himself. I believe he would have done so if—if—" Cecilia's voice again broke, and she thumped a nervous tattoo on the table. "When he was twenty-two," she continued, "he brought out a book, but, as I expect you know, it wasn't a great success. Nevertheless, on the strength of that beginning, he and Maisie became engaged. A little while previously, too, our aunt had died and left us some money, so our circumstances were improved.

I still found it necessary to work, but Maisie's drudgery was at an end. She had a fancy, to which I was rather averse, to go on the stage, so for the last year she has been studying at a school of dramatic art. The fees have been a consideration, but I have been so glad for her to be happy and occupied. She hoped to make a start this spring, but now I don't know what will happen. He was getting on so well too, writing magazine articles, short stories, and so on."

She drew a deep breath and ceased, then passed her hand across her eyes with an angry choking sound, and suddenly sprang to her feet and began to pace the room like a man. "I can't believe it—I can't believe what's happened. It's too horrible—too horrible," she muttered spasmodically.

Hawe leant forward with hands clasped between his knees, and eyes averted. "Poor chap!" he said.

Cecilia stopped and regarded him.

"His last thought was of you. I should have told you sooner."

Hawe looked up. "After I left—did he speak?"

"A few words." Cecilia supported herself against the kitchen table. "I sat beside him and held his hand. He was half-unconscious most of the time. Then he seemed suddenly to rouse himself and there was a change in his face. That dreadful impassive look—you know—well, it passed; it seemed to slip away and leave—Jim. Maisie would have known him then."

"And he spoke?"

"Yes. He turned his head towards me and said, 'Tell Hawe—the letter!' in a clear whisper."

"Nothing else?"

"Nothing else."

"But then——?"

"Then it was all over. He just gave a little sigh, and I hardly realised it was the end. I think he wanted to send some message."

"But what could he have meant?" said Hawe rather blankly.

"I don't know. 'The letter,' he said. What letter? Ah! didn't you tell me there was a note addressed to you found in his pocket?"

"By Jove!" said Hawe, and fumbling in his own, drew forth an envelope. He sat staring at the address, which was written in a weak, straggling hand. The missive was stamped, and the superscription blotted and untidy. Hawe lifted a face that suddenly appeared rather sallow, towards Cecilia. "Shall I open it?" he said.

"Not here—unless you wish," she answered quickly and uncomfortably. The next moment, however, she heard the sound of tearing paper and a flutter as the envelope fell to the ground. She turned her back on him and began aimlessly to move some things on the table. She felt a dull surprise that he should choose to read this message from the dead in her presence. Even though, during its perusal, he apparently did not desire privacy, her impulse was towards self-effacement. The idea was strong enough in her mind to conquer any curiosity as to the contents of the letter. She felt self-conscious—out of place. The silence that had fallen between them seemed intense and dreadful—pregnant with a thought surviving the brain whence it had emanated. Cecilia, with a sense of delicacy, would not look at Hawe for fear of observing in his face the expression of a shock to his susceptibilities, or of gaining therein a clue to the purport of the written message. Yet she half expected that at last he would speak. The silence became disconcerting. Surely by now he must have read the letter. She began to wonder what effect it could have caused. By now looking round, would she pry on his emotions? She paused a moment longer before she turned her gaze in his direction. Then the aspect he presented made her catch her breath, with a feeling akin to fear.

Hawe sat with head drooping forward and eyes down-cast. His face was livid. His shoulders were bowed, his hands, one of which clutched a written sheet of paper, hung limply at his sides; his whole attitude

betokened utter nervelessness and mental prostration. Cecilia felt this to be no occasion for the offering of sympathy. In face of such overwhelming sorrow, she was helpless. She stood regarding him, her kindly eyes dimmed with tears, the thought in her mind that a man's grief was more terrible to witness than anything she could have imagined.

Hawe appeared to remain unconscious of her gaze. Suddenly the insistently ticking clock struck four. The sound seemed to rouse him from his torpor. He slightly raised his head and stared before him. His eyes held a tense look of horror. Then, with a seeming effort, he lifted his hands and laid them on his knees. After another moment the fixity of his gaze wavered, travelled round the room, stayed on her face. He made a movement and gripped the back of the chair.

"I think," he began, his voice strange and muffled, and his utterance thick, "I think—if you don't mind—I'll go."

He pulled himself to his feet and stood still clinging to the chair. For a moment his body swayed; the next, he passed his hand across his eyes, straightened himself and moved towards the door, groping as though he could not see the way. Before he could reach it, he lurched against the wall. Cecilia started forward. He looked at her with a dim, almost whimsical smile, and she caught the words, "My knee—dammit!" Then he slid to the floor in a dead faint.

CHAPTER V.

NEVER before had Cecilia Courtfield found herself in a predicament that was at once so unforeseen and so alarming. She stood and stared down at the man, paralysed for an instant by the absolute unexpectedness of his collapse. Her mind was so filled by surprise that it held no room for conjecture, though she felt a shadowy conviction that a mental strain alone could not account for Hawe's fainting fit, and that the cause of so sudden an event must be something beyond her understanding. With an overwhelming sense of fear, displacing her astonishment, she bent over him, touched his shoulder, and called him by his name. Then, with a return to common-sense, she hastened to fetch some cold water and to sprinkle it on his face. Her fingers shook as she next fumbled with his tie, and sought to open his collar. The strangeness of the contact, the unconventionality of the whole situation, sent a nervous tremor throughout her frame. But, with a strength born of necessity, she shook off her fears to face the emergency. She proceeded to drag the dead weight of Hawe's body out from the wall, till he lay flat on his back on the floor. Then, with panting breath and compressed lips, she placed a hand within his coat and waistcoat, and began frantically to rub the surface of his shirt, beneath which she could feel the feeble throbbing of his heart.

At this juncture the whirring ring of an electric bell reached her ears. She lifted her head. "The front door," she said aloud. "At least, someone who will help me."

She left Hawe and flew down the passage. Having opened the door: "Irene!" she exclaimed with a gasp of relief, to greet the general servant of her small establishment, who had now returned from her Sunday's

outing. The new arrival was of the type who call themselves "lady-help": a small, underdone-looking young woman, clad in a dress of emphatic purple. Her face was round and colourless; her expression singularly vacuous. Her light hair was drawn tightly back from her forehead, beneath a yellow straw hat tilted unintentionally to one side.

"I'm not lite back," said Irene entering.

"Not a bit," returned Cecilia; "but oh! Irene, the most awful things have happened while you've been out."

"Kitchen chimney caught fire?" said Irene nonchalantly, yet with an air of certitude.

"No," said Cecilia; and standing in the passage, proceeded hurriedly to explain.

"Lor!" exclaimed Irene. Her mouth dropped open, and her eyes grew wide; her expression became more vacuous than ever.

"And the gentleman who brought us the news suddenly fainted just now, and he's in the kitchen at present, and I can't bring him to, and for mercy's sake come and help me, Irene," concluded Cecilia, her voice rising rather hysterically.

"Lor!" repeated Irene. It was her one ejaculation. She continued at short periods to let it off like a minute-gun, as her interlocutor led the way to the kitchen, until, when she caught sight of Hawe's figure, it culminated with explosive emphasis: "Lor!"

"He hasn't stirred," cried Cecilia, once more kneeling beside the man, and beginning to chafe one of his limp hands. "What *are* we to do, Irene?"

"He's dead," returned the lady-help cheerily.

"He isn't—he isn't! He's fainted. Why doesn't he come to?"

"Minds me of my pore brother what was killed in the works at Sheffield," continued Irene thoughtfully. "Caught up in the machinery, 'e was, and got every bone in 'is body broken. 'Is screams, they said, were somethink 'orrid."

"Yes, I know," said Cecilia. "You've told me. But what shall we do now, Irene? Would you mind

fetching the smelling-salts bottle from my dressing-table. No—stay—perhaps we ought to call in a doctor. There must be something the matter with the man to make him go off like this.”

“Stummick, maybe,” said Irene.

“What?”

“A weak stummick, maybe. It takes me that way sometimes. I know. Often and often I’ve felt that bad——”

“A doctor,” broke in Cecilia. “I really think, if you don’t mind—run downstairs, like a good girl, and see if Dr. Brassy on the second floor is at home, and if so tell him what’s happened and ask him to be kind enough to come up.”

“An’ what’ll you do?” said Irene without stirring.

“Stay here. Go—do go.”

The lady-help turned leisurely away, but over her shoulder allowed a lingering glance to remain on Hawe.

“Minds me horfully of my pore brother,” she murmured.

“Oh! hurry up, *please*,” said Cecilia, “and let the front door stay ajar, when you go out.”

Irene left the flat and descended the stone stairs. On her way she pursed her lips, and whistled a few bars of the National Anthem. Reaching the second floor, she paused and rang the bell of a flat, that corresponded in outer appearance to the one above. A very small youth, with a cold in his head and an ill-fitting suit of “buttons” on his back, opened the door.

“I want to see Dr. Brassy,” said Irene.

“E’s dot ad ’obe,” said the youth through his nose.

Irene for a moment stared at him steadily. Then—“You’re a liar,” she said with conviction.

The youth took a rag of unspeakable appearance from his pocket and sniffed into it. “Ady’ow, ’e’s restink,” he then confessed.

“Im a doctor and resting,” said Irene, with a snort.

“Lemme in.” She pushed her way past the door.

“It is’d ’is ’our for seeink visitors,” came the helpless appeal.

"Get along with you. What are you talkin' about?" was the firm retort. "Run along and fetch him, or I'll——."

From one of the rooms, there suddenly emerged the subject of the altercation, a thick-set young man, with prominent grey eyes, whose gaze seemed never still. His hair and moustache were dark and suggested the use of pomade; his whole appearance was so eminently sleek, as to risk similitude to the common or garden slug.

"What is it?" he said. "Am I wanted?"

"I've come from Miss Courtfield, at Number 29," said Irene without nervousness, while the boy retreated baffled. "Miss Courtfield's compliments, and she'll be obliged if you'll step up there at once—sir." The last word seemed a concession.

"Is one of the Miss Courtfields ill?"

"No—but there's a gentleman we don't know dyin' on the kitchen floor." The statement sounded serious.

After some questioning, Brassy arrived at a dim understanding of the situation.

Eventually Cecilia's straining ears caught the sound of a heavier tread, that accompanied the lady-help's returning footsteps. She heaved a sigh of immense relief, and a moment later heard Irene's voice in the passage.

"An' I says to Miss Courtfield, I says, 'Bless'd if 'e 'in't the livin' image of my pore brother what was killed in the works at Sheffield. Caught up in the machinery, 'e was, and 'is screams——'"

"Oh! Dr. Brassy, thank goodness," said Cecilia, holding out her hand to the new-comer.

"A most awkward occurrence, I understand," he returned, with a cheerful unction that was meant to reassure.

"Yes—the poor fellow."

"He hasn't come round yet?"

"Once, for a moment, he seemed to revive, but fell back again, unconscious, almost immediately."

"I have brought some sal volatile. A weak heart, probably."

Brassy knelt beside the man, making his examination.

"Now I think of it," said Cecilia, "he appeared first to be suffering from some injury that had happened to his knee. He walked very lame, and seemed in pain. He complained of inflammation."

"An accident? Something recent?"

"No, I think not."

"Well, we can see. Smelling salts? Thanks. Ah! that's better."

Hawe turned his head with a gasp; then drew a deep breath.

"A little brandy, please, Miss Courtfield. Now you'll be all right." Brassy forced the spirit between the other man's lips. Hawe choked a little, opened his eyes, and struggled to support himself on his elbow. Cecilia helped him with an arm round his shoulder.

"Wha'—the—devil——" he began weakly. Then he yawned.

"A little more brandy," said Cecilia.

Hawe took the glass in both hands, and gulped down the rest of its contents.

His face began to regain its normal colour. He yawned again.

"Feeling better?" said Brassy.

"Sick a bit—help me up—I'm awfully sorry." With the doctor's aid he staggered to his feet, and sat down on a chair. The movement caused his face to once more grow ash-coloured.

"Something wrong here," said Brassy, eyeing him.

Hawe's lips were set and his hands clenched. After a moment, he spoke faintly. "Nothing—all right—can't think why I made such a fool of myself. Must apologise. Ah! what the deuce are you doing?"

Brassy had laid a hand on his knee, and was feeling it with firm fingers. Hawe winced from the touch with a muttered exclamation.

"What's wrong?" asked Brassy.

"Nothing—leave it alone."

"There's something the matter; what is it?"

"Damn you; go away," said Hawe with feeble violence.

Brassy's face pinkened, and he drew back. "I don't know if you're aware that I am a medical man," he said.

Hawe put a hand to his temple.

"I beg your pardon," he conceded.

"I understand that you have in some way injured your knee?"

"A mere nothing, I assure you."

"Will you allow me to look at it?"

"No," said Hawe, "I won't."

The light of curiosity held Brassy's restless eyes for a moment fixed.

"I think you are unwise," he said.

Hawe smiled. "Do you indeed?"

Cecilia interfered. "I called in my friend Dr. Brassy when you fainted, because there seemed no apparent cause for your collapse, and I was alarmed," she said to Hawe.

"There wasn't any reason," he averred.

"But your knee?"

"An old hurt which occasionally becomes inflamed—that's all. Lately it has been troubling me a good deal. To-day I suppose I made it worse." His gaze travelled watchfully from the woman to the man.

"It must be rather bad to have made you go off like that," said Brassy.

"A bit painful—yes."

"So I should imagine. Rather a mistake to put your foot to the ground, is it not? Are you subject to fainting-fits?"

Hawe hesitated momentarily. Then—

"My heart's rather touchy," he said.

"I see. So you would really prefer to dispense with my services?"

"Oh, thanks, I'm all right now."

Hawe suddenly pulled himself to his feet, but as

Cecilia held out a helping hand, he sank back on to the chair, looking sick.

"Not quite, I think," said Brassy, and, an instant later, was down on his knees, conducting the investigation he desired.

Hawe gave a little baffled laugh.

"I see you find it necessary to bandage your knee," said the doctor, after a moment. There was no reply. Brassy's deft fingers were busy. A strip of linen was removed, and thrown on the floor, where it lay, showing on the inner side a red stain. Cecilia, seeing it, felt an unaccountable return of her fears. Brassy seemed very intent on his work, crouching between herself and Hawe. He looked up at her suddenly with his bland smile.

"Could you get me a little warm water, please, Miss Courtfield, and a sponge?" Directly she had left the room—"I thought you said the injury was not a recent one," he continued smoothly.

Hawe remained silent.

"May I ask," went on the doctor, "how you came by a bullet wound, not later than about twenty-four hours ago, and why you have been anxious to conceal a fact, which is as unusual as it must be inconvenient?"

"You can ask what you please," returned Hawe drily, "but I guess my answer's my own affair."

"Then you don't choose to offer me an explanation?"

"Not unless you'll accept the suggestion that you may be mistaken."

"My dear sir," said Brassy smiling, "permit me to know my own business."

"You seem keener on learning mine; but, my dear sir, permit me to know my own leg."

Brassy went on unperturbed:

"A bullet from a revolver, I should think; must have passed through the flesh and grazed the knee-cap. Ve—ry extraordinary. Not a dangerous wound, but it must have bled pretty freely. I can't think how you could have borne to use your foot."

"You don't mean to say you'd acknowledge yourself beaten by that detail?" interposed Hawe drily.

"I confess I am not surprised at your endurance having eventually given out. The place is much inflamed. I shall bandage it properly, and then——"

"The devil you will!" said Hawe viciously.

Cecilia re-entered the room.

"Anyhow," he added in a whisper, "I'd be obliged by your saying nothing."

Brassy gave him a quick glance, with raised eyebrows. Hawe nodded towards Cecilia, whose back was turned. A silence fell on them. Brassy washed and bound the wound, and Hawe submitted to his ministrations with an ill-concealed impatience.

When he had finished, the doctor spoke once more. "I think you should allow your medical attendant to dress the knee again fairly soon," he said to Hawe.

"Thanks," returned the latter.

Cecilia spoke aside to Brassy.

"Is it anything serious?"

"There is some inflammation. He should lie up, and have medical attendance."

"Then was the injury originally bad?"

"No," said Brassy, hesitating slightly. "Oh, no. But what with neglect and one thing and another, you understand——"

Cecilia received the impression that Hawe had suffered from starvation. Brassy turned to his patient. "Well," he went on unctuously, "when you feel all right, I'll help you downstairs, and see you home."

Hawe growled an ungrateful response, and gave his attention to Cecilia. "I am fearfully sorry to have caused so much inconvenience, Miss Courtfield."

She stopped short his excuses. Irene was despatched to summon a cab, and returned after some moments to announce that one waited below.

Hawe, with the doctor's help, prepared to take his departure, and Cecilia followed them to the door.

"Please take care of yourself," she said to the object of her solicitude. "We—Maisie and I—will never forget all you've done for us to-day."

"Nor I your kindness. Good-bye."

"Good-bye. We may hope to see you again one day?"

"Of course."

"There, hold on to the banister rail, that side," interposed Brassy, "and take my arm. "That's right. Good-bye, Miss Courtfield."

As they descended the stairs—"I suppose," said Hawe grudgingly, "that I owe you some sort of thanks for your help?"

"Pray don't mention it," returned Brassy.

"Well, but I've done so, haven't I?"

"Scarcely with enthusiasm."

"One isn't enthusiastic when one doesn't feel grateful. To be candid, I find your interference most damnably inconvenient."

Brassy tittered. "Yes, so it appeared," he said. "Nevertheless, the prerogative of the medical profession——"

Cecilia, from above, watched their progress. Within the flat, Irene surveyed the disorder of the kitchen. On the floor she suddenly noticed lying a discarded letter, and at a little distance from it, the envelope whence it had been taken. She picked up both. First she read the address on the envelope, then she perused the writing on the sheet of notepaper. Then she murmured her one ejaculation several times. Her expression remained quite vacuous. She turned the letter backwards and forwards, re-read it, and finally, after folding it to fit the envelope, tucked it away into the recesses of a pocket at the back of her purple skirt.

She then pursed her mouth to whistle a hymn tune, and proceeded to put straight the disarray of her surroundings.

CHAPTER VI.

IN the early spring, there lurks about the London parks and gardens a charm and freshness that are lacking at the height of the season. In the solitudes of green spaces especially there is such peace, that it would seem the country had invaded the town and had proved all-conquering. By June or even by May, the grass will have lost its young verdure, and the leaves of the trees have grown *blasé*. There will be flowers in plenty flaunting from the beds, and seeking to outvie in gaiety of appearance the well-dressed world that passes crowding by. The nodding blooms, like social *débutantes*, will eclipse their mother earth and form, in their masses, too smart a contrast with the quiet ruralness of trees and grass.

There are some minds that prefer the youth of the year, when it seems only to have learnt one colour, and with a naïve but hesitating delight, shows everywhere green and green and green. At first without variety. Then, grown bolder, it sounds the changes on the colour, and every day the year makes new discoveries in shades of budding leaves, and sprouting bushes, and turf that is sunflecked or shadowed, or frankly emerald like an enamel in the light.

As, on an afternoon in April, Sidney Hawe loitered through Kensington Gardens, the beauty of the day and of his surroundings made him warmly content, happy as a young animal and at sympathy with Nature. His pleasure was increased by a thoroughly human knowledge of his own power of appreciation. He was glad to feel that, far from having lost it in gaining thirty-five years of age, it had grown with his manhood into strength. It made him long, now, for movement and physical exertion; he would have liked to run, or

ride an unbroken horse, or do anything to give vent to the sense of health that stirred in his veins. His mind, too, seemed keener, more virile, more full of life. He was in the mood to quarrel with a man, or make love to a woman, and conquer both by subtlety of argument, from pure excess of energy. He had set out for the walk with a sense of unutterable boredom, because London seemed to offer nothing worth the doing. In the midst of crowds, he felt horribly alone. In town he had few friends. To-day, however, before he had been out of doors ten minutes, he knew that solitude could not affect the optimism of his mood. He had walked down from Marble Arch to Hyde Park Corner, then had struck northwards and at last had turned to stride past the Albert Memorial, towards the deserted Row. He swung a stick and smoked a cigarette. He wished it were possible, without appearing conspicuous, to throw both away, dig his hands into his trousers pockets and whistle a rag-time tune. The Park was almost deserted. "But it wouldn't do to feel one looked odd," thought Hawe. He swung into the Row, along the Knightsbridge side. Some ragged men lay motionless, face downwards, on the open space of grass before the barracks. They were probably asleep, but appeared so inert, so rigidly outstretched, that they might have been dummy figures. Here there was not a pedestrian in sight. He walked on till he came within view of the Albert Gate. Then he suddenly perceived a woman, coming towards him from the distance. She seemed to be of medium height, and from the lines of her figure might well prove to be young. She held up her skirt with one hand, and displayed small feet and trim ankles. Hawe could see that she carried, besides, some parcels. He felt a little glow of pleasurable interest, and a mild curiosity as to whether her face was pretty. Involuntarily he quickened his step. Now he observed that she was plainly, even shabbily, dressed. She wore a little round black hat, trimmed very simply with a ribbon bow in front, a light covert coat of three-quarter length, and a black skirt, spattered round the hem with

mud. A decision to accost her suddenly formed in his mind. If he were in any luck, she would not be the sort to resent an impertinence. Otherwise, she could but administer a snub, and what did it matter? The distance between them lessened. She was walking with downcast eyes. The contour of her face was charming. Hawe reached her, paused, and raised his hat with his most pleasant smile. "Good afternoon," he said.

She looked up at him. "Why, it's Mr. Hawe," she returned, and dropping her skirt, held out her hand.

Hawe, somewhat abashed and recognising only in her face a familiarity to which he could put no name, took the hand, pressed it warmly and said, "This is nice."

She pulled away her fingers with a flush that rendered her appearance doubly attractive. Then one of her parcels slipped from her grasp. As Hawe stooped to pick it up, the girl's identity flashed across his memory. It was Maisie Courtfield. The meeting had been so far from his thoughts, that he nearly betrayed his surprise. As it was, his face took on a sudden warmth of colour, and retaining his hold of her package, he could find no better remark than—"What a perfect day, isn't it?"

"Yes, indeed," she answered. "I've got quite hot walking down from Hyde Park Corner."

"You are energetic," he said foolishly, wondering at his own unexpected sense of shyness. "Are you on your way home?"

"I thought of going as far as Kensington Church and there taking a 'bus," she answered.

"Oh! let me walk with you," he said; "and see here, I can carry your parcels." He began to retrace the way he had come, at her side.

"Fancy our meeting like this!" said Maisie. "Let me see, it's a month ago, isn't it, since——?" She lingered on the word and broke off. Hawe finished the sentence.

"Since the day I first saw you? More than that, surely. Wasn't it February?"

"I daresay, though to me it seems like yesterday."

She sighed. Hawe preserved an uncomfortable silence.

"Though I couldn't thank you at the time," she continued, "I haven't forgotten how good you were to me on that occasion." There was a little tremor infinitely touching in her voice.

"Oh, it was only the least I could do," said he, with a vivid recollection of all that had occurred. "Please don't talk about it. I am sure you would rather not," he added after a moment.

She looked up at him with expressive eyes. "How kind you are!" she said softly; and he experienced a perfectly new sensation, half pain, half pleasure, rather as though he had received a slight electric shock. He immediately looked away from her and gazed straight ahead.

"I'm glad we met," she continued, with an engaging candour. "You see, I've wanted to thank you, and—we rather hoped you would come and see us."

"I would have," he returned quickly, "only—I—I—was laid up for a while, after that day, and then—with one thing and another——"

"You forgot," she interposed, with another glance.

He looked at her with a half-curious smile. "No—I don't think I forgot," he said.

"Then why didn't you come?"

"I think I was rather afraid."

She laughed. "Afraid of what?"

He hesitated. Then—"I didn't want to see you still unhappy," he blurted forth.

"Oh!" A little silence, till in a softer tone—"I think time alone can heal the wound," she said. Her intonation held enough pathos to cover the triteness of the remark.

"What a tactless brute I am, to remind you of all your trouble," said Hawe gruffly. "Can you forgive me?"

"Ye-es," she answered tremulously. "You couldn't know your words would hurt."

Hawe cursed himself inwardly.

He broke the succeeding pause by asking after her sister.

"Cecilia?" said Maisie. "Oh! she's all right. Dear Cecilia; she has been so sweet to me."

Hawe put from him the obvious comment that no one could fail in such a respect, knowing it to be the sort of thing he would have said to an ordinary woman. As no other reply was at once forthcoming, she went on:

"Cissy told me how you fainted at the flat. I hope you are quite well again now—from the cause, I mean."

"Oh, yes," said he; "it was nothing."

They had reached the Alexandra Gate, and he stopped suddenly in the pathway.

"Say, are you in a great hurry to get home?" he asked. A touch of Americanism sometimes invaded his speech.

"No," she said smiling. "Why?"

"Well, then, let's sit down on some of those little green chairs over there and talk."

"Is conversation easier when one isn't moving?"

"Yes; don't you think?"

They had crossed the road, and he stepped over the low iron rail that divides the turf from the gravel, and offered her a helping hand to follow him. They sat down on the chairs.

"Nice and green and quiet, isn't it?" said Hawe, looking round.

"Perfect. And if I hadn't met you, it would never have occurred to me to take advantage of the opportunity to rest."

"Are you tired?"

"No—not exactly; I don't feel physically weary, only——"

"Mentally?"

"Yes. Everything seems so purposeless, and town life is so restless. Don't you know what I mean? The never-ending crowds, the ceaseless noise——"

"Yes, I know," he said. "I know. I've lived right

out West in the wilds—where the dome of the sky seems wider than it is here—where a man feels nearer to the brown earth, as though it really had a personality and were his mother—I've lived in great solitudes and heard all the pulses of Nature throbbing—and I've felt, times, when I've ridden over the prairies, that the whole world lay before me like a splendid woman, asleep and breathing regularly. Oh! the peace of it—past understanding. I wish I could tell you——” He had spoken dreamily; now he broke off abruptly.

Maisie gave a little soft laugh.

“How nicely you talk about it,” she said. “I think you must have a great sense of appreciation, and that's a rare quality in a man, isn't it?”

“Is it?”

“Surely,” said Maisie, “or else the majority hide the light of their feelings beneath a bushel of commonplace.”

“Very likely they do, in cities. Out there nothing's commonplace, and so, if you understand one's conversation and mode of living, can never be trite. Yet it's all so simple and clear. At the time, one doesn't talk—one lives. There's the difference between freedom and restriction. Townfolk, coming back to them, seem like so many head of cattle, stampeding here and there, bellowing among themselves, following where one or another will lead, just idle, heedless mad brute-beasts, with never a 'boy' to round them up and show them the right direction.”

“Cattle?” said Maisie, with wide-open eyes. “What, cows, do you mean—and bulls? What a funny simile.”

Howe laughed. “It was silly—I've lived on a ranch you see, and it just came to me. But I don't see why I should air my views, anyway. It's a habit in which I don't often indulge.”

“Why not?”

“Well, you learn far more by just lying low and keeping quiet, don't you think? And after all, unless you're extra smart—with brains enough, I mean, to

pass on your knowledge—you're only anxious to obtain it for your own satisfaction."

"That sounds selfish."

"Oh! I'm selfish," he said whimsically. Then, "Let's talk about you now," he added. "Are you still feeling brain-tired?"

"No, I don't think I am at this moment," she returned with a little laugh. "I believe you've charmed away my worries."

"I'm glad. You must get the upper hand of them, and prevent their return."

"That sounds easy," she retorted, "but I'm one of those silly people, to whom a sense of trouble recurs. I sometimes think I must be more susceptible than other people to sorrow." Her tone was gently pathetic, and the gaze she fixed on Hawe was so soft and wistful, that he lost sight of the fact of her self-commiseration, and the little tendril of sympathy, that had grown round his common-sense, put forth a fresh shoot.

"Yes," he said gently. "I daresay you are."

"I suppose some women are bound to be more high-strung than others," she continued thoughtfully. "It's a matter of temperament, and a state somewhere between a blessing and a curse. I mean, it helps one to *feel* all that is beautiful in the world, and yet it renders one more sensitive to pain."

"Does it?" said Hawe. He was watching the girl's expressive face with the keenest pleasure. She was really lovely. What did it matter if she chose to talk pretty feminine nonsense?

"I believe you understand me quite well," she went on, glowing. "There's further proof that you have the appreciative sense. And I daresay you have the artistic temperament as well. Now, haven't you?"

He laughed. "I'm sure I don't know. What is it?"

"Well, haven't I been telling you? But I feel convinced you really understand. Tell me, don't you *feel* it within you?"

"Oh," said he, slightly bored, "I haven't spent the sort of life that encourages introspection."

"Haven't you ? Then don't you think it a good practice ? "

"Introspection ? That depends, doesn't it ? "

"On what ? "

"Well, for one thing, on one's environment. I have changed mine so often, that I have found it better worth while to observe the various people with whom I have come in contact, than to take any special interest in my own personality. Besides, introspection is a habit indulged in only by women and the religious."

Maisie looked rather shocked. "Are you speaking sneeringly ? " she said.

"Oh, no," he answered quickly ; "but, as I am neither one nor the other, my standpoint must of course be rather different. I coupled a reference to your sex with one to believers, having in my mind members of the Christian religion, because it seems to me that the quality of being feminine and the quality of being religious should always be united in one person. For both I have an immense respect, and I think that a woman to be perfect should be large-hearted and small-minded."

"Oh, you can't hold any such horrid opinion ! "

"I can indeed."

"But why ? "

"Because, as I have said, I have a preference for good women, and any I have ever met have had just those qualifications."

"I believe you're a cynic," said Maisie.

"That sounds very disagreeable," said Hawe. "What does it mean ? "

"Or else you were joking," she continued, ignoring his question and regarding him seriously. "You couldn't really admire a good woman—not in your heart of hearts."

"In my heart of hearts I'd respect her," said Hawe. "She'd appeal to my emotions, though not to my intelligence. I mightn't admire her (isn't admiration rather a lukewarm term ?), but I could fall in love with her—she'd be my ideal—my perfect woman."

"And yet you'd allow she was a fool? All nice women aren't stupid!"

"Aren't they?" said Hawe smiling, and wondering how she would look angry. Then he put his arm across the back of her chair and leant towards her.

"I have always thought," he said, "that none of the clever women of the world are at heart moral, and few of the stupid ones are immoral. The latter, you see, would be so easily found out. If fools keep straight from necessity, surely a good woman would be a fool by choice. There's my argument."

Confusion and anger struggled in a flurry of red on the girl's cheeks. "I can only say I think it's most unpleasant," she returned.

"Well, what is your opinion?" he asked.

"That you are rather rude," she answered with a little annoyed laugh.

"Rude?"

"Yes. You leave me to deduce that you think me a fool, as I have given you no cause to—to—think me—improper."

"Now, that's really very sweet of you," he said, his mouth quivering upwards.

"What?"

"To read just what I meant, in spite of the clumsy phrasing."

"Mr. Hawe!"

"Please don't be cross. Do you think a great deal of your own intelligence?"

"I shouldn't be so conceited; but—"

"Well, neither do I," he interrupted, scarcely aware that his words were running away with him. "If you were a clever woman, you wouldn't look at me that way with those two great innocent blue eyes, but you'd argue with me so subtly, that I should alone feel for you a grudging admiration, instead of beginning to feel madly——"

Maisie rose hastily from her chair.

"What's the matter?" said he.

"I'm sure it's getting near tea-time. I must go

home," she said, poking at the turf with her umbrella, and not meeting his gaze. He had risen too.

"Come and have tea somewhere with me—do," he said.

"No, thanks very much."

"Are you offended with me?"

"Oh, no."

"Then come and have tea at Fuller's in token of forgiveness."

"No—I'm really afraid I can't."

"Why?"

"Well, Cissy will expect me home."

"Then we'll send her a boy-messenger."

"She'll feel lonely."

"Why, she'll have the boy-messenger, won't she? She can give him tea and talk to him. *Please*, Miss Courtfield."

"Very well," laughed Maisie; "but I feel very untidy."

"I wish I were a mirror and could tell you without flattery just how nice you look."

They walked across the Gardens to High Street, Kensington, and were served with tea and cakes, by a superior young person at Fuller's shop.

Hawe continued a decorous flirtation with his companion. Her blue eyes were full of laughter and encouragement, and he could not but give her to understand that the innocent coquetry with which she poured out the tea found him fully appreciative. He treated her with a respectful and suggestive courtesy, that she thought infinitely attractive. After the meal, he expressed his intention to see her home.

"Oh, no," she said; "you mustn't trouble."

"*Trouble*?"

"I'm sure it will be out of your way."

"What does that matter?"

"No—please—it has been delightful, and I'd like you just to see me on to a red Hammersmith 'bus, and then go in your own direction."

"You are rather unkind," said Hawe, who was not keen on an expedition to West Kensington.

"Never mind; you'll get over it," said Maisie.

"How do you know? But, say, you haven't told me what afternoon I may come and see you."

"You may come to-morrow, if you like."

"May I? Good. What time?"

"Oh! about four o'clock."

They left Fuller's, and noticed a crowd round a motor at the corner of Church Street. Maisie turned rather white and became suddenly serious.

"Beastly things, motors; they're always going wrong," commented Hawe.

"Oh, how I hate them!" she said, with sudden vehemence betraying what was in her mind.

They walked on in silence, till she hailed an omnibus. Then turning to Hawe, "Thank you very much," she said, with her pretty tremulous smile. "I so enjoyed my tea. Good-bye."

"So long," said he, and pressed her hand. She climbed to the top of the 'bus, and smiled down at him from her seat. He lifted his hat and turned away. Crossing the road, he joined the dwindling group round the motor. A chauffeur was fussing round it with a spanner. A few errand-boys and a policeman were all that remained of the crowd. A tall woman in a long pale grey motor coat and cap, having apparently just alighted from the car, stood by, with her hands in her pockets and a bored expression on her face.

Suddenly she caught sight of Hawe.

"Why," she said, advancing towards him—"aren't you—"

"It's Mrs. Hamilton, I do believe," said he simultaneously, and greeted her with undisguised pleasure.

"I'm glad you recognised me," she said, shaking hands; "for I really wasn't *sure* I knew you. And I can't say I remember your real name now, but I know you're the man that I always used to call 'Toby.'"

"Ten years ago," said Hawe laughing.

"You needn't be so tactless as to remember the flight of time," she rejoined. "In the meanwhile, look at this." She pointed towards the car.

"What's happened?"

"Goodness knows. I don't pretend to understand the beastly thing. The chauffeur says it got hot or something coming down the hill, and now it can't go on. Did you ever hear anything so silly? I was driving, and he's insinuated it was my fault. I'm furious."

"So I should think. Were you going too fast?"

"H'sh! There's a policeman behind you. Don't make it any worse. I'm going home. Say Hi! to a cab, like a friend."

Hawe beckoned, and a hansom clattered to the kerb. The lady got in.

"Come along," she said. "I want to talk to you."

Hawe followed her.

"Tell him 79B, Sloane Street," she added, "and then do put me right as to who you really are."

CHAPTER VII.

"I WAS christened Sidney, and my other name is Hawe," said he, shutting the apron over their knees. She regarded him, screwing up her eyes, with a quizzical look.

"I remember," she said. Her voice was rather hard, and she spoke in a languid tone as though it were a trouble to enunciate. "I remember—and I always called you Toby, because you were so like a dog. You're still that, but older. You look as if you'd seen and done a good deal. Have you?"

"Oh, yes."

"Oh, yes," she said in imitation, and again made the little grimace with her eyes. It was a new mannerism, since last he had known her. "Oh, yes; well, what?"

"What have I done?"

"And seen—yes."

"A good many things; ten years' worth."

"Oh, how you do harp on the ten years! What a time ago it seems, doesn't it? It was awfully clever of us to recognise each other!"

"You didn't recognise me," said Hawe.

"Yes I did. It was only your name I forgot, and considering I never called you by it——"

"Well, I remembered your name, anyway."

"Excuse me—my husband's. But I suppose that was just as wonderful; however did you manage it?"

"I just felt I knew you, and it flashed across me you'd married a man of the name of Hamilton."

"That was clever; but you didn't actually remember me?"

"I did indeed."

"Then what was my name?"

Hawe hesitated, laughing.

"You're caught out," said she.

"I'm not. It was something short—beginning with an 'I'—wait—don't help me—an odd little name, I know. You once said it must have been given you in sarcasm, because they knew you'd be the sort to belie it."

"Did I say that? How frank of me!

"Yes—it was quite true—such a quaint little nun-like name; it never suited you—it's on the tip of my tongue—Ina—no, Ita——"

"Elizabeth—Priscilla——"

"There, now you've put it out of my head."

"Never mind. Tell me, what are you playing at now, in town?"

"Pretending to feel at home."

"Really? Then you've just come back from somewhere."

"British Columbia. I've been in England a month."

"Dear me! and doesn't it amuse you?"

"Well, everything seems so small," he returned with a laugh.

"Oh! you've been living on a big scale I suppose. What have you been doing?"

"I've got a ranch out there now. At first I went in for mining. I haven't come home a millionaire, but I've made enough to live comfortably and to afford for a little while to live idly. Just think—it's about five years since I was last in England."

"And have you been in British Columbia all that time?"

"Oh, no; originally I enlisted in the yeomanry and went out to South Africa, you know. I went through the Boer war, and when it was over I stayed out at the Cape and learnt something of mining. Then I got rather sick of that. I'd made some money, so I went to California and started farming. That didn't pay, so I sold up, and started again in Canada."

"You've kept moving."

"It's better fun than sitting still."

"Yes, I daresay. Well, see here, we haven't finished our talk, and we're just going to arrive. Isn't it a bore!"

"Let me come and see you one day," he said.

"Of course," she answered. "Are you busy to-morrow? Well, then come to lunch."

"I shall be delighted."

"Very well, that's settled; two o'clock."

The hansom stopped, and he alighted and helped her out.

"Are you going to take the cab on?" she said.

"Yes, I think so."

"Where are you staying?"

"Wigmore Street."

"Well, *au revoir*!"

She nodded, smiled, and entered the house. Hawe drove away. He lighted a cigarette, and gave himself up to reflection. He regarded his own life in retrospect—a view that he did not often take, as it rendered him dully angry and sensible of a resentment against Fate. His meeting with Mrs. Hamilton had carried his thoughts back to the days of his young manhood, a period he would have preferred forever to forget. As a child, while his parents were in India, he had been brought up, puritanically, by a low-church clergyman and his wife—relations of his mother. His guardians sought to imbue him with a high sense of honour, and at the same time to lead him along the narrow and precipitous paths of a methodistical faith. As guides, they lacked the intelligence to gauge a boy's character. Sidney was essentially independent. On to his natural freedom of thought, they grafted so extreme a sense of the orderliness of things (their own outlook inclining towards a ticketing of the universe and a conviction that good and evil stand apart as the poles), that the result in his mind was, after a chaos of doubt, the triumph of priggishness. Thus he entered upon his public-school life, with a certain high pride in the excellence of his own moral standpoint. Naturally, he suf-

ferred, but as he was impressionable to influence, the grit that underlay his soft upbringing came to the fore and stood him in good stead. He was intended for the army. His people came home and settled in London. Colonel Barchester, his mother's husband, was a clever man, with a violent temper, a total lack of human sympathy, and an ignorance of the faculty of affection. His career in the Indian army had been unmarked by any special recognition of his services, owing to the innate vanity that eclipsed his abilities, and he had now retired with his pension and a sense of injury. Having some private means, he felt himself well enough off to live beyond his income, in a house in Queen's Gate Gardens. His wife had been a beautiful woman, and lived now on the memory of past conquests and the interest of present ill-health. She suffered from heart disease. Besides Sidney and before his advent, she had borne one other child—a girl, who reproduced her beauty, and was already married to a commissioner in the Punjab. Sidney remembered nothing of his sister. He had given his mother a prompt and protective devotion, but yielded only a grudging admiration, devoid of affection, to her husband. The latter returned this appreciation, and stood on the defensive against any closer tie of sympathy. The boy took all his confidences to his mother.

In due time he passed high into Sandhurst, and left the college to enter a line regiment, with a generous allowance from Colonel Barchester, and the permission to exceed it and live, if he chose, without counting the cost. He was not slow to follow such advice, and developed an extravagance that drained to the utmost the home resources. Colonel Barchester took in him an immense pride, saw as little of him as possible, and drew on his own capital, that the young man might never be stinted for means. After a period at Malta, Sidney's regiment was stationed at Aldershot, whence he obtained leave sufficiently often to live the life of a man about town. When he was twenty-five he met Mrs. Hamilton, then an unmarried girl of twenty. He

promptly fell in love, with youthful desperation. She flirted with him, encouraged him, and, uncertain of her own mind, put him off when he was on the point of a proposal. With an unreasoning conviction of the fickleness of women, and the damage to his own heart, he was eventually about to apply for an exchange, with the object of seeing active service in Egypt or of risking death by fever in an appointment on the West Coast of Africa (the aim of either course being to show the lady of his affections how badly she had behaved), when his mother suddenly fell ill, and he heard that she lay at the point of death. All other troubles were merged in this real sorrow, as he hastened to her side.

Then, in her last hour, with a supreme effort of the selfishness for which she had always been remarkable, Mrs. Barchester made a confession. Sidney learnt that he had no right to his place in the world, that he was illegitimate, nameless, the unwelcome result of a *liaison* with a Calcutta merchant, who had since married, become the head of a respectable family, and retired to live in a villa at Streatham. Sidney gathered that the social status of the man had been below that of Colonel Barchester, that the latter knew nothing of the *liaison*, and, with a faith that was as unquestioning as it was convenient, had accepted the boy as his own son, and now stood on the verge of bankruptcy, as a consequence of the subaltern's extravagance.

Having cleared her conscience, the dying woman murmured feebly: "Dearest boy! I felt I owed you the truth, but I trust you will allow matters to remain as they now stand. My husband is very proud of you—the matter would cause him considerable annoyance—but, of course, you can judge about telling him for yourself—I shall be at peace. . . . God bless you Sidney—you've been a good son——"

Then she drew her last breath. She left him her income of £120 a year, and he went to the widower, divulged the true state of affairs, and expressed his intention to resign his commission, take his mother's maiden name, and pay off with the capital she had

bequeathed him the debt he owed Colonel Barchester for his education and allowance. The latter, as a stricken man will sometimes do, vented his sense of fury and injustice on the nearest and most guiltless object. He was brutally cold and business-like in accepting the terms of the proposition, spoke as a superior to one beneath him, and called Hawe by the ugly name that expressed his position. At a white heat of injury and shame the young man cursed circumstance, and departed to form a degenerate philosophy in which little should be held sacred—and self alone considered. He cut himself adrift from all friends, as well as from the relations with whom he had lived as a boy, and, having left the army, prepared to settle in London and find work that should enable him to live. With his extravagant tastes and ignorance of any trade, this did not prove so easy a matter as he had anticipated. For a year he lived hard, mixed with a Bohemian set, and was never out of debt. One day he awoke to the knowledge that he owed some hundreds and possessed a few pounds. About the same time, he saw in a newspaper that the lady, whom he still imagined had broken the sentimental side of his heart, had married a Captain Veysey Hamilton, in the —th Dragoon Guards. He yet owned her photograph, the full-faced picture of a girl in evening dress, with a quantity of coarse dark hair done low on her neck, a beautifully poised head and narrow smiling eyes, whose colour he remembered was a greyish-green. He looked at the portrait wondered how he could have ever thought her pretty, and tore it across the face, but did not throw it away. It still had for him a certain fascination, and in after years he would hold the two pieces of the photograph together, and regard the whole quizzically.

In the meanwhile, he made fresh efforts to find employment. He had been a fair amateur actor, and now turned his attention to the stage. Through the interest of a Bohemian friend, he obtained eventually a "walking-on" part, in a piece that was running at one of the London theatres. In the play there was a reception

scene. Hawe was announced as one of the guests, had to appear, speak some inanities, and pass on to go through some by-play with an actress, about whose proximity there always lingered the smell of liquor. It was at first amusing, but night after night it palled. He used to set his teeth at last, as he went through his meaningless part, striving on each occasion to put some new inflection into the idiotic words. When he shut his eyes, he could remember the lines now.

In the end he lost his employment, through the interest of the same friend, now jealous, but originally helpful. Having taken up typing and shorthand as a hobby in former years, he was lucky enough, then, to obtain a post as secretary to a business manager. It was at this time that he became acquainted with Jim Reesdale, a struggling young journalist of mediocre talent and weak character, who at once evinced for Hawe a profound admiration, without receiving much return. Theirs became a one-sided friendship: the younger man seeking advice, imitating the other's habits and mannerisms with sincerest but annoying flattery, and making no secret of his genuine devotion and trust, while Sidney gave toleration and lukewarm regard, tempered by an inner resolution to make all possible use of the boy's simplicity for his own ends.

Hawe had fallen low, and was the more to blame that he was fully aware of his moral deterioration, and made no effort to rise. From a high sense of honour, he had sunk to a disdain of scruples; from a pride that had placed him above viciousness, he had allowed himself to stumble in dirty paths—and to remain careless of how much he besmirched himself or others. His mental attitude was, at this period, the one of a man who, having been wronged, stands henceforward on the defensive against all the world, and oblivious that his injury was from an individual, turns general blame and hatred towards all the community. "I have no name to keep clean," was his unspoken thought; "so why should I be careful of honour or reputation? For me neither exist—as a man I count for nothing. I am among

those who have no place. Heredity and circumstance must always be against me. I will side with them, take the way they point, and allow myself to drift. For me there shall be no wrong and no right, but alone my own convenience." To this point he adhered. From young Reesdale's slender resources he borrowed money, with but small intention of repaying it, and was utterly careless of what influence he might exert, by his example, over the boy's character.

From the secretarial appointment, Hawe's luck led him to a tutorship in the country. He obtained the post by the simple method of ingratiating himself (a faculty which never failed him) with a helpless and rather ignorant old lady, in whose charge had been left the two small orphan boys, who were to become his pupils. Work of whatever nature was a necessity to Hawe, and though he was undeterred by any thought of his own unsuitability to act as mentor, the idea of filling such a position filled him with an ironical amusement. He taught the two small boys to play cricket, then, with the stirrings of a latent honesty, went to his employer, and said:—"I may as well tell you I'm no use. I have forgotten all the Greek and Latin I ever learnt, and am quite incapable of teaching them anyway. We're neither of us playing fair by the lads. You should send them to a preparatory school." The old lady was flabbergasted, but wept when Hawe went away.

After this, the man led a varied life. On one occasion, when he had been for some time out of work, his finances dwindled to such a low ebb that he found himself with the price of one meal in his pocket, and the knowledge that he owed that and more for his lodging. He went to a registry office and applied for a situation as valet. He gained a place, with the aid of credentials of his own composition, and went abroad with his master—a *nouveau riche* of the most blatant type. A sense of humour alone made the position tenable for three months, then he tendered his *congé*, and felt once more free.

His succeeding experiences would have filled a book.

In the social scale he sank lower and lower. He was by turns a newspaper reporter, a stage-super once more, and a cab-driver. Once, in the latter position, his fare consisted of a man and woman, presumably husband and wife, whom he drove to a theatre in the evening. As the lady stepped into the hansom, he caught sight of her face; pale, almost plain but for the narrow, expressive greyish-green eyes, and the perfect poise of the head with its wealth of coarse dark hair. He found the coincidence amusing beyond anything.

Soon after, the South African war broke out. He enlisted at once in the Imperial Yeomanry and went to the front. Thereafter, his adventures were of a type to alter the misanthropic standpoint he had hitherto held. Life and the fulness thereof, instead of mere existence; strenuous endeavour instead of a sordid struggle; necessary companionship and an infectious ambition instead of loneliness and a lack of desire; all these conditions moulded his character anew, and went far to relegate his sense of injury to the past.

In the years that followed, he learnt, with regard to men, a fellow-feeling born of common exertion, and with regard to the women of his class, at first merely a fresh tolerance, but later a respect, originating in a lack of association.

* * * * *

Thus Sidney Hawe, after his meeting with the woman who had power to stir the dead leaves of his memory, reviewed the circumstances of his past life. In his recollections there was much bitterness. But one realisation brought wholesome satisfaction.

Through all his experiences, however low he had sunk, his vitality of body and mind had increased, till at the present he knew himself, in the fullest sense of the description, a man who lived.

CHAPTER VIII.

ON the following day he arrived, in accordance with the invitation he had received and accepted, at the door of Mrs. Hamilton's house in Sloane Street. He was admitted by a man-servant of episcopal appearance, and ushered through a narrow hall papered with plain dull red, and up a white staircase that was carpeted thickly with a darker shade of the same colour as the walls. On the way he observed some old prints of religious subjects framed in dark wood, which hung against the warm tint of the background. An old bureau of ebony inlaid with ivory stood on the landing. The man-servant opened a heavily and noiselessly-swinging white door, and showed Hawe into the drawing-room, then retreated with an injunction to "be seated," that sounded like a benediction. Sidney found himself in an atmosphere faintly scented with the perfume of lilies of the valley, of which he at once noticed a bowlful on a low Moorish table. The room, long-shaped and divided into two parts, was unoccupied. The front division was the larger and ended in a deep bay window, in which stood a chintz-covered couch piled with cushions. The window was curtained doubly with light-patterned brocade and lace. To the left of the sofa stood a tall palm in a stand of beaten copper, to the right a table of marquetry surmounted by a small revolving book-case filled with modern literature. The walls were covered with scroll-shaped panels of a pale green paper, that had the aspect of striped silk; the woodwork was painted white. There were two reddish-tinted copies of pictures by Bougureau, a tiny seascape by Van Hier, some miniatures on a heart-shaped background of dark velvet, and a group of exquisite Sèvres plaques. The floor was of polished parquet. An arrangement of

flowering plants replaced any fire in the grate. On the mantelpiece stood some silver-framed photographs, several glass vases filled with flowers, and a few specimens of rare china, and above it there hung a square piece of Chinese embroidery, the design of which was stitched in gold and silver and faintest pink and orange, on a groundwork of delicate grey-green satin. Hawe had sat down on one of the many chintz-covered chairs. It occurred to him that his surroundings were characteristic of a woman of taste. At the back of the room, he observed an open grand piano and a writing-table with silver appointments, that appeared lately to have been used. Before it stood an upright gilt chair, and there was a litter of torn letters and a newspaper lying on the floor. As his hostess continued to remain absent, he rose and entered the inner room. It was more in the nature of a boudoir, lighted by a smaller window, and showing somewhat untidy evidences of recent occupation. A white cloth coat was thrown across an armchair, and a pair of gloves lay on the piano beside a litter of music. Along the wall ran a long bookcase of plain light oak. It was crammed with volumes, few of which stood in their proper places, but were mostly piled one on the other. Upon the writing-table stood an open box of cigarettes and an ash-tray, filled to the brim with charred ends and fine grey dust. Here also, a profusion of flowers made the air heavy with their scent, and above the mantelpiece, which was crowded with photographs, further piles of books, a heap of match-boxes, and some insignificant ornaments, hung a round mirror framed in oak.

Hawe, after his survey, felt that he knew Mrs. Hamilton better. The lapse of time and her married life could not fail to have greatly altered the woman, for whom he was aware that his sentimental regard no longer existed. In pondering the change he had already noticed during their brief meeting, and in foreseeing the strangeness that they must mutually feel in a more prolonged interview, he had been conscious of a sense of constraint that almost amounted to a dread of the impending

tête-à-tête. But the deduction that he could now form of her mode of life put him more at his ease. The girl of twenty had grown to be a woman of the world, with artistic tastes and the vague habits that mark one whose time is given over to social duties. Hawe formed his opinion and began to pace the room. Her prolonged delay did not render him impatient. He attributed it to the easy carelessness, which he felt certain was characteristic of the woman and her type. Yet, according to his ideas, this casual behaviour lacked the elements of courtesy. He had been invited to come at two o'clock. He had arrived punctually. Twenty minutes had passed, and still his hostess deferred her appearance. He grew hungry. Presently his thoughts flew off at a tangent: "I wonder what sort of a fellow Hamilton is? I wonder if he'll be at lunch!" At this juncture, as he looked out of the bay window, leaning with one knee on the chintz-covered sofa, he heard the click of the opening door and a silken rustle of petticoats. He started round. Mrs. Hamilton, wearing a black dress of exceptional cut and a black hat, advanced to greet him with outstretched hand.

"My dear man," she said, "*how* long have you been waiting?"

"Quite a short time," he returned.

"Really? I simply prayed you wouldn't have arrived punctually. You can't believe how vague I am. I'd actually forgotten you were coming, and I met Bab Waterfield—you know her?—in Bond Street, and she said she'd got a lunch on at the Carlton, and asked me to join the party. Just imagine—I accepted, and got as far as the vestibule of the place, before I remembered you. Then I told her, and simply tore back in a hansom. Please forgive me—I'm quite mad."

She laughed and sank on to the sofa. Hawe seated himself beside her. She removed her veil, which was thickly spotted with chenille, from her hat, and continued to talk in her lazy voice. Hawe regarded her more critically than he had done the previous day. Her face was thin and too long for beauty. Her complexion,

he remembered, had never been good ; now the skin had a smoothness that suggested massage, and she was carefully made up—her nose, which was straight and long, bore a dusting of powder ; there was a faint touch of rouge on either cheekbone ; and her thin lips were reddened. The effect was not displeasing, but Hawe had all a man's prejudice for the use of cosmetics. She had even and strong-looking little white teeth, which she showed a good deal when she talked. Her eyes, oblique and expressive, arched with thick black brows and fringed with heavy lashes, were still fascinating. Her dark hair, which was waved and held a tinge of copper-colour that he failed to recognise, was brought low on her forehead in a big puff, and stood out extravagantly on either side beneath her hat. At the back, it was gathered in a loose coiled knob on her neck. She began to remove her gloves. Her hands were small, white, and rather bony. The fingers were long, and ended in highly-polished tapered nails. They bore several diamond rings and one set with emeralds. In her ears she wore large pearl drop ear-rings, and round her throat a necklace of the same stones, and a long gold chain from which hung a finely-linked purse and a pencil. As she moved her hands, her innumerable bracelets with their pendant trinkets jangled like chains.

"I'm sure," she said in a few moments, "you must be starving. Let's go down to lunch. I'm simply fainting for want of food, aren't you?"

"Not quite so bad as that."

"Really? Well, come on."

She led the way from the drawing-room. She was a tall woman with a very slim and graceful figure. When she walked, she moved smoothly, with rather a drooping pose. They went downstairs and entered a dining-room, where the scheme of colour was a dull orange set in dark wood. Here again were quantities of flowers. Silver bowls of fresias and fern stood on the perfectly-appointed table.

"I feel guilty at having taken you away from your luncheon party," said Hawe, as they seated themselves.

"But I wouldn't have missed you for anything—don't you understand? It was too nice for words, meeting you yesterday. I'm dying to hear all that's been happening to you since last we knew each other."

"That's rather a large order."

"Yes, I suppose it is. Quite a lot of things happen, even to a woman, in ten years. Not the least of them is that she grows older."

"What nonsense!" said he, as the comment seemed expected. She screwed up her eyes at him and laughed.

"All right, I didn't want a compliment. D'you know, to-day's my birthday—I'm thirty-one."

"Your very good health," he returned, raising his sherry glass.

"Oh! wait for hock. Fizzy wine's luckier, isn't it? But talking of luck, just before I met you yesterday, I'd been to a fortune-teller—a woman who lives in the wilds of Notting Hill. It takes quite a time to get there even in the motor. Mrs. Pilkington her name is. Have you ever been to her?"

"No, I'm afraid I don't believe in that sort of thing."

"Don't you, really? Why, everybody does nowadays; and—what was I going to say? Have some more fish? No? Well—whatever was I going to say?"

"I expect you were going to tell me what sort of a fortune she gave you."

"That was it. 'Cute man! She said I was going to have a stroke of luck and meet an old friend. Wasn't that wonderful? Don't you call that a fair proof that there must be something in clairvoyance?"

"Oh, I don't know."

"But there is—indeed. I'm rather good at crystal-gazing and palmistry myself, so be careful. I'll be seeing all the events of the past ten years in your hand—perhaps." She was laughing again. "But tell me about yourself. You've been in British Columbia. What's it like?"

She drew him on to speak of his experiences. He found that she had travelled a good deal, and was in no sense narrow-minded or insular in her ideas. She had traversed Europe, besides knowing most of the Continental *rendezvous* of society, and she had crossed the Atlantic to visit New York, and had made a tour through Canada. As Hawe was well acquainted with the States they were able to compare notes.

"How queer it seems, doesn't it," she said suddenly, "to think that we've grown up and lived since last we met?"

"As far as I can remember, we were equally alive then," he returned.

"Were we? I don't think so. I was in a chrysalis stage anyway, and so, I believe, were you. Now we're each a human being of exactly ten years of age."

"You make me feel I ought to be wearing Etons and going to a preparatory school."

"Why, ten years is a very long while," she answered. "It's half a lifetime as regards experience, and we're through with some of our schooling." Her eyes took on an expression half satirical, half pathetic. "We've found our footing, anyway," she added.

"One has to fight for that," he said.

"Oh, yes; one's bound to get bullied a bit when one first goes to school," she replied.

"But women fall soft generally, don't they?" he said, watching her curiously.

She laughed. "Do they? I think they more often do the fagging for the bigger boys, and have rather a rough time. But what nonsense we're talking. Have some more wine?"

"No, thanks," he answered; then added abruptly, "I've never met your husband, have I?"

She raised her eyebrows. "I don't know. Haven't you ever come across each other?"

"Not that I can remember. I should like to see him awfully."

She regarded her fingers that were busy crumbling her bread and smiled ironically. "I'm afraid it would be

rather awkward," she began, then paused and looked up suddenly with a mischievous laugh. "Didn't you know—really?" she questioned.

"What?" said Hawe.

The servant had handed the dessert and left the room.

"That my name—well, that I've left off calling myself Mrs. Hamilton?" She was still laughing, but he felt hot and cold by turns with apprehension, and could not speak. His amazed stare was her only answer. She peeled an apple coolly.

"Well—as you haven't heard—Veysey and I didn't hit it off," she said. "We—oh! I suppose we weren't each other's style exactly, don't you know. After we'd been married about a year, Veysey developed a preference for something rather more pronounced, and I always had a devil of a temper, d'you remember?"

She paused, and bit a piece of the apple from the end of a dessert fork. The scrunching of her strong little teeth filled the momentary silence that Hawe felt incapable of breaking. Then she began to cut the fruit methodically into dice on her plate.

"It ended by his bolting with—whom should you think—not an actress—nor even my best woman friend—Veysey's tastes were always rather *outré*, he ran away with my maid."

She laid down her knife and fork, leaned her elbows on the table, and with her chin in the palms of her hands regarded Hawe with cynically smiling eyes.

"By Jove!" said he, and twirled his wine-glass nervously.

"It *was* a bit surprising, but, my dear Toby, *such* a relief."

"A relief?"

"Yes—she was an attractive-looking girl, but so silly at hair-dressing; and Veysey—oh, well, I *am* bad-tempered, but I really prefer to be peaceful. When the two people who riled me most in the world—my maid and my husband—left me in each other's company I sat down and laughed till I cried."

"I don't believe it," said Hawe gruffly.

"Well, you needn't unless you like, but allow me the privilege of pretending that I did, now. As a matter of fact, I quite forget what happened. It was three years ago, you know. We lived in Grosvenor Street then—a hideous house that I hated. After the divorce proceedings—I think it was only fair to give them a chance of marrying each other, don't you?—I came here. That's all—except that I call myself by my maiden name now—it was Hamlyn, if you remember."

"But," began Hawe—"yesterday——"

"Oh! you called me Mrs. Hamilton. Yes, I know. It would have been a little difficult to set you right then, wouldn't it? We were strangers."

"By Jove!" he said again, "I am sorry—you must have had a devil of a time—forgive me, won't you?"

"What for? Bringing up the subject? My dear fellow, how could you know, and what does it matter? As far as I can remember, we always used to call each other by our Christian names. I don't intend to call you Mr. What's-your-name any more now, than I did when I was twenty. You were Toby then, and Toby you shall remain. But, by the way, you don't remember mine, do you?"

"Yes," he said, "I thought of it last night. You were called Pia."

"The feminine of Pius—like a lady-Pope. What delicious irony, wasn't it? But, how did you manage to think of it?"

"You wrote it across a photo you gave me years ago."

"I gave you my photo? How young of me! (Won't you have a liqueur with your coffee?) But how infantile of you to keep it!"

"Yes, wasn't it?" said Hawe, laughing. "When I heard you were married I tore it in half——"

"That was most discreet," she interposed.

"And I kept the two pieces."

"How amusing! Try one of these cigarettes."

She handed him a silver boxful. "By the way," she added, "I believe I've got a portrait of *you* somewhere put away. I have a recollection of your showing it me one day, with immense pride, and that I had no choice but to ask for it."

She lighted a cigarette and puffed at it.

"You'd been taken in full-dress uniform, looking quite nice."

"Oh, had I?" Hawe blew out the match he had lighted and regarded the blackened splinter with some concentration. After a moment—"I hated leaving the service," he said abruptly. "I had to, you know—couldn't afford it."

"Poor Toby!" she said with sudden softness.

"Oh, I daresay I'm better off as I am," he answered; "and I've certainly had a far more interesting time, knocking round. As a subaltern, one's ideas are apt to be bounded by a hatred of one's C.O. or his wife, and a sense of one's own importance as an Imperialist."

"I remember how you used to honour me with your confidence," she said laughing.

They drifted to recollections. Later, as they sat in the drawing-room—"What are you doing this afternoon?" she said. "I've promised to go to a private view at five—if you like, you may come too."

"Thanks awfully," he answered, "but I've got to pay a call—some people of the name of Courtfield. You don't happen to know them?"

"Where do they live?"

"Rosemore Mansions, West Kensington."

"West Kensington! Oh, no, I don't think I've ever heard of them. Are they—er—old friends of yours?"

Hawe told her how the acquaintance had originated.

"Dear me!" she said, when he had finished the story. "Quite interesting. What a pity they live in the wilds. What sort are they—Bohemian or suburban?"

"I really don't know," said Hawe, rather piqued. It was so long since he had been brought in contact with

the fine social distinctions of London life, that he felt completely bewildered. "I should think they weren't very well off," he added, "and I believe the locality suits them."

She screwed up her eyes at him quizzically. "I suppose, when one lives in town one's ideas are apt to grow along a groove," she said. "One's inclined to ticket everyone with dowdiness, when they aren't in one's own set or the one above it. I don't believe you're familiar with the limitations of London, Toby. Remember we belong to a nation of snobs."

"When I was last at home, an Englishwoman would scarcely have confessed as much," he said lightly, yet with a sensation of real surprise.

She laughed. "That was when patriotism ran high, wasn't it? Oh! my dear man, we've long since outgrown that phase. If one wishes to be up-to-date, one must run down one's country and be the author of sarcasms at the expense of one's nation. Nowadays, we all take up the standpoint of onlookers. I sometimes think that if we could but realise that each individual of the community only apes his neighbour, while pretending to judge him, we might be disabused of some of our folly."

"It seems," said Hawe, "that there is a good deal I shall have to learn." Then he rose to go.

"How do you travel to your destination?" she said.

"Isn't it a day's journey in anything but a motor?"

"Oh, a hansom can do it in less than the twelve hours," he said, laughing. "D'you know, when I first got back to town I cabbied it everywhere; then for the second week I travelled always in the tube or the underground; the novelty for me of the former hasn't worn off yet, but I soon got sick of the sulphur. After that, I spent my time on the tops of omnibuses. You can't think what an experience it felt. Lately, in the desire for exercise, I have walked everywhere."

"And now you revert to cabs, and that shows how we progress backwards," she said. "Well, good-bye, Toby. Come and see me again soon."

CHAPTER IX.

Hawe reached the flat in Rosemore Mansions at five o'clock, and having rung was admitted by Irene, who wore a bow of lace slightly to one side on her straw-coloured hair, and a muslin apron to shield the skirt of her purple dress. She smiled a welcome and said, "Good-afternoon." Hawe, rather amused, responded before he asked for Miss Courtfield.

"Please to step this way," said Irene, and showed him into the sitting room. Then pausing by the door, "Mr. 'Awe, isn't it?" she said, with condescension.

"Eh?" said he, "my name—oh, yes—Hawe."

The lady-help retreated, and he sat down on an old-fashioned sofa, that was covered in a dingy-patterned stuff of red and yellow, to wait.

The room, by contrast with the one he had lately left, seemed to him singularly unlovely. It also was a double apartment, and the division was marked by draped curtains of crimson serge, looped aside with tasselled cords. The low wainscot and the door were of a light wood, varnished with an artificial grain; the wall-paper was of a nondescript design in shades of drab and green and yellow, and against it there hung a superfluity of pictures, brackets and painted plates.

The room was lighted by a long French window, tightly veiled in printed muslin, through which Hawe could see the outlines of a small balcony. A string that depended from the cornice-pole bore the weight of a green and gilt bird-cage, enclosing a canary who sang lustily. In a corner near the window stood a small upright piano, the back of which was decorated with yellow art muslin, an abnormal insect of cotton wool and several Japanese fans. On the top of the piano stood a great many photographs, framed in plush, gelatine

or fancy leather, and one vase of bright blue glass, containing artificial carnations, cut in coloured paper. More fictitious blooms, in the form of daffodils and roses, were arranged with a sparse mingling of real narcissi, in other vases, which stood, some upon a black and gilt cabinet of meretricious design, others upon the marble mantelpiece. There was an overmantel of looking-glass framed in brackets of bamboo. A round tea-table of the same wood and wickerwork stood ready laid, before a low chair covered in blue plush.

In the inner division of the room, Hawe could see a small square table, covered with a fringed cloth and surrounded by some upright chairs. He suspected, rightly, that the uses of these were for dining.

The whole apartment was unnaturally and uncomfortably tidy; its ordered precision was almost irritating in the suggestion that such a state had been assumed for the visitor's benefit. There were no traces of recent occupation; each chair stood correctly square with uncrumpled cushion and unruffled antimacassar, and even the canary had a conscious air—or so it seemed to Hawe—as it hopped sedately from perch to perch. The man felt that, to this, the vague disorder of Pia's boudoir was infinitely preferable. In the midst of his meditations, Maisie Courtfield suddenly entered. Her face was flushed, her eyes were shining; her whole personality seemed to diffuse the charm and fascination of an ideal type of girlhood. Hawe experienced a glow of admiration, and in his contemplation of her fresh loveliness forgot the dismay that the manifestations of her lack of taste had at first struck in his mind. Maisie apologised for not having sooner appeared, and added—“I'm glad you've come. It's so nice of you to have remembered.”

“Did you think I would have forgotten you had asked me, since yesterday?” he said, laughing.

“Well,” she returned, seating herself on the blue plush chair, behind the tea-table, “I couldn't be certain. You might meanwhile have received another invitation.”

"Oh, come, that's not fair. You know I wouldn't purposely miss coming."

"So you say," she retorted gaily; then with a bright glance, "Should I feel flattered?"

Irene entered with a silver teapot and a covered muffin dish on a tray, deposited the things and retired, only to return carrying a wicker cake stand, decorated with ribbon and furnished with plates of edibles.

"I hope you got back quite safely last night," said Hawe, to break the pause that had ensued.

"Oh, yes, thank you," answered Maisie, lifting the teapot with such care that he felt convinced its use was a concession to his presence. On the occasion when he had made that cup of tea in the kitchen, he had employed a squat little pot of brown stoneware, and he remembered that it had poured far better than the elegant plated article which the girl now held in her hand. The idea that he was being treated with the dignity befitting a casual though honoured acquaintance, brought with it a sense of discomfort.

The conversation languished.

Then—"Cecilia hasn't come home yet," said Maisie, as she handed him a cup. "She does secretarial work in the City, you know."

"Yes," said Hawe, "she told me. How does she like it?"

"Oh, I don't know. Very well, I believe. At least, she never complains."

"One can't always do that," said Sidney, with a slight smile. "I know. I've acted as amanuensis to a business man in my time. It was drudgery."

"When was that?"

"When I was a young man."

"A young man?" she echoed laughing.

"Well, I'm getting on now," said Hawe. "I'm thirty-five."

"Are you? I thought you were less."

"It's very charming of you to have considered the question."

She dimpled. "I haven't. I received an impression—that's all."

"Nice impression?"

She ignored the question, but met his eyes with a bright glance. "Yesterday it occurred to me that you must be about twenty-eight or nine."

"Oh, yesterday," said he, "the weather was so fine, I felt about fifteen. And, by the way, I've just seen another lady who averred I was only ten years old. I shall soon begin to believe in my own youth."

"Thirty-five isn't old," said Maisie.

"You don't think so? I'm glad. (May I have another of these pink cakes? Thanks.) Yet the lady who mistook my age for ten, called that half a lifetime—seemed to think in fact that I am on the verge of elderliness."

"How absurd you are!" laughed Maisie.

"I'm not joking. I repeat my friend's statements. She was, I believe, speaking of age in relation to experience."

"Oh, experience," said Maisie thoughtfully. She leant back in her chair, with hands folded behind her head and a far-away expression in her eyes. "I wish," she continued girlishly, "that I had had more experience. I've never done anything worth the doing, or seen anything—important."

He laughed. "You've not had very much time, have you? There are yet some years in which to gain knowledge."

"But I want to begin now—at once."

"And what do you want to do?"

"I'd like to travel all over the world. I'd like to enlarge my mind. You've journeyed a great deal, haven't you?"

"A passable amount."

"I think it must be lovely. I simply yearn to go abroad. I suppose you've been to France and Germany and Italy, haven't you?"

He could not keep back a smile. "Yes—I've been about Europe a little." He had not forgotten his experiences as a valet.

"How splendid!" said Maisie. "Then, besides my desire to travel, I have a special aspiration. I wonder—would you laugh at it, if I told you?"

"Of course not," he replied. "Personally I have never been blessed with a particular ambition. The only aim I ever had was to be successful in a general way—to get on, don't you know, and make money."

"Haven't you ever wanted to make a name for yourself?"

Hawe smiled a little ironically. "No," he answered slowly; "funnily enough, any desire in that direction slipped away from me about ten years ago."

She laughed. "Oh, now you're joking again. But please be serious when I talk of my aspiration."

"What is it?"

"She leant towards him with clasped hands. "I want to be a famous actress," she said impressively.

He nearly laughed. The stage-struck type was so very obvious. Instead, he said, with interest—"Do you really?"

"I'd like to be as great as Sarah Bernhardt, or Ellen Terry——"

"So would we all," he interposed, with a faint smile.

"Yes; but, I'd like to be great in one especial line. Romantic comedy—costume plays—are those I like best. But—am I boring you? Perhaps you're not interested in the stage?"

"I'm not in the least bored, thank you. D'you know—once, for a while, I was a member of The Profession myself. I suppose it is still spoken of in capital letters, isn't it?"

"Oh, how interesting! Whose company were you in?"

"I almost forget," he said; "it's a long time ago. I was always at the foot of the ladder."

"It's a long climb," she returned; "but if only one brings love to bear on one's work, it's made far easier, don't you think?"

"Any occupation's all right when one's keen," he agreed.

"If I could only start in Lewis Waller's company, I

think I should be quite happy," she continued. "Don't you think he's quite the best actor we have?"

"I'm afraid I don't know the name," said Hawe. "Whom did you say?"

"Lewis Waller. He started in management some years ago. His performances are always magnificent."

"It's really so long since I was last in London," confessed Hawe with comically-wrinkled brow.

"And you haven't been to see him since you came back?" Her tone was almost amazed.

"No; but then I haven't been aware of my loss. Perhaps one day you would act as guide, philosopher and friend by allowing me to take you to a *matinée*."

"Oh, how I should love it!" said Maisie, flushing with delight.

"That's a promise, then, for some future date."

"How very kind of you!"

"If you will choose what piece we are to see, thanks will be due from me," he said.

"Then may we go to the theatre where Waller is acting?"

"By all means."

"I'm sure you couldn't fail to appreciate his talent," she continued earnestly, "and of course he has good looks, which are always an advantage, don't you think?"

"Undoubtedly," said he, regarding her pretty, serious face.

"I collect theatrical picture post-cards, and have got quite a number of his portraits in different parts," she went on. "Would you like to see them?"

"Immensely." In face of her enthusiasm, Hawe grew laconic.

Maisie rose, opened the door of the black and gilt cabinet, and brought forth an immense volume bound in a bright cover. He offered his help, as she staggered beneath its weight.

"Oh, no; it's all right," she returned panting, and seated herself beside him on the sofa, with the book on

her knees. "I've got 1,600," she continued. "Isn't that good?"

"Magnificent!" he answered, and wondered dimly if she referred to a number of volumes all of this size. To him the craze was new. She opened the book and disclosed the post-cards that fitted into spaces on every page.

"That's Millie Legarde," she said pointing to one of the portraits.

"Oh! by Jove!" said Hawe. "How ripping! Where's she acting?"

"I forget. And there's Mabel Love, and Edna May, and Grace Lane. Isn't she charming? And Alexander—oh! I simply worship Alexander, don't you? By the way, do you collect post-cards?"

"No," said Hawe; "I don't think I've ever had time."

"Haven't you really? What a pity! I mean, you might have made a splendid collection, considering you've travelled so much."

"Oh, somehow, when one's trekking, one does find other occupations," he returned whimsically.

"Ah! here are my Waller post-cards," she said the next moment. "Isn't he nice?"

"I liked the picture of the little girl in the short skirt best," he answered, and turned the page.

Maisie slapped his hand playfully. "You rude man!" she said laughing. "I wanted you to look at Waller."

At her touch, Hawe felt his blood leap, and through his veins there passed a thrill of excitement. He echoed her laugh softly, snatched at her fingers that lay on the page, and leaned towards her with eyes grown suddenly bright. She pulled away her hand, shut the volume unexpectedly on his knuckles, and, with a little giggle, rose quickly from the sofa, leaving the weight of her collection on his knee.

"There's Cecilia just come in," she said, a listening expression combining with her merriment. "I heard her key in the latch. And she'll want some tea, poor dear."

Maisie busied herself at the wicker-work table, showing alone her profile to Hawe.

The door opened abruptly and Miss Courtfield appeared.

"Oh, it's you," she said brusquely, yet with a pleasant smile, when she saw Sidney. "How are you? I'm glad you've come." She gripped his hand in her big palm.

"Your sister and I met yesterday, and she was kind enough to ask me," said Hawe.

"You'd forgotten your promise, then?"

"I hadn't indeed," he answered, "but circumstances——"

"Ah! well, never mind," she interrupted. "Maisie, dear, give me some tea."

Cecilia sat down on an upright chair, with an arm hanging over the back and her legs crossed. She had a peculiar faculty for assuming ungraceful attitudes. Now she looked tired and overworked. Her plain face was sallow and rather dirty; around her eyes there were dark and greasy circles, and in repose her lips were set with austere compression. Her appearance was not enhanced by the shabby coat and skirt and the plain black felt hat she wore. She had raised her veil, and it drooped a ragged edge absurdly over her forehead. Maisie handed her sister a cup of tea and the muffin dish.

"These teacakes are cold," said Cecilia, with her mouth full. "All right; sit down, my dear. I'll have bread and butter." Then, turning to Hawe, "I always feel the want of my tea, after sitting cooped up the whole day in an office," she added.

"I expect you do," he replied.

"By the way, you're a believer in tea as a pick-me-up, aren't you?" she went on. "I shan't soon forget—" She pulled herself up, with a glance in the direction of the girl, covered the sudden pause with a cough, then continued hurriedly, "Oh! and how's your knee?"

"Quite all right, thanks."

"Only for the present, or will it go on troubling you, do you think?"

"No, it's perfectly well now."

"Then you lay up, as Brassy advised?"

"Yes."

"That was right. He's rather a clever little man, you know. Not that I like him. He's too much like a slug—and those shifty eyes—" Cecilia laughed. "If I remember, you didn't cotton to him either."

"I'm afraid I was rude," said Hawe, "but I don't think I quite knew what I was saying, and I haven't much recollection of what happened, anyway."

"Oh! he fussed you abominably, and you swore. I rather sympathised with you. I hate doctors and their ways myself. Maisie doesn't agree with me, do you, Maisie?"

"I think medicine's a magnificent profession," said the girl guardedly.

"And that Brassy is one of its most able exponents, eh? Ah! well, I don't deny he's intelligent. Give me some more tea, dearie."

"There isn't any more in the pot," said Maisie, lifting the lid and peering within.

"Then give me milk—no; go and ask Irene to make some fresh."

"But——"

"The bell's out of order in here, as you know, and I really do want some more tea. The last lot was too nasty—not made with boiling water. See to it, like a darling."

Maisie laughed good-humouredly, made a little face at Hawe, and disappeared, carrying the pot. Directly her back was turned, Cecilia moved her chair nearer to the sofa, leant towards the man and spoke quickly in a low tone: "I wanted to see you alone. Tell me, how do you think she looks?"

"Your sister?" he questioned; then, as she nodded, he added, "Why, she looks very well."

"Not as though she were worrying?"

"No, indeed."

"At first, you know, it was dreadful," continued Cecilia hurriedly. "After—after that day, she cried for almost a week on end. I thought she would be ill; her condition bordered on hysteria. Then she seemed quite quickly to recover, and now she is once more her normal self; so much so, indeed, that I'm afraid she may be hiding her grief. But you have seen her alone—you don't think she is doing that?"

"No," said Hawe slowly. "I don't think she is doing that."

"Yet I can't believe that, in this little time she can have quite got over—the—shock," murmured Miss Courtfield in a low tone.

Hawe hesitated. Then, wondering at his own temerity, "Aren't you perhaps judging her feelings by your own?" he suggested softly.

Cecilia looked down at her hands, which lay patiently folded in her lap. "Oh, no," she returned, "oh, no. How could that be when—when she loved him as the woman of his choice—and—why, I only loved him just as an elder sister?"

"Poor soul!" he said, very gently; "poor soul!"

She gave him a quick glance from her tired light-hazel eyes.

"You're a good sort," she said brusquely.

A little silence fell between them. Hawe broke it, leaning towards her suddenly.

"You remember the letter I wrote you, the day after I first came here?"

"Yes. Before Maisie I thought it better to say nothing. At the time, you see, she was quite knocked up—and now—we scarcely ever refer to what happened."

"Of course not—so I supposed." The man hesitated momentarily and Cecilia spoke.

"You wrote about the letter *he* had sent you, saying you had missed it and thought you must have dropped it on the kitchen floor, when you fainted, I remember. D'you mean to say you never found it?"

Hawe nodded. "Just that."

"How extraordinary!"

The man pulled at his moustache almost nervously, and would not meet the woman's gaze.

"How extraordinary!" she repeated.

"Yes," said Hawe, "it was queer, wasn't it?"

He glanced up at her suddenly, but her expression was one of blank surprise alone.

"You *couldn't* have left the letter here," she went on.

"Of that I'm perfectly certain. When I heard from you, I searched for it high and low, but without success. I even asked Irene (our servant) if she had seen it lying about anywhere, and she answered she had not. You must have taken it away with you. Mightn't you, inadvertently, have put it in your pocket?"

"It wasn't there when I got home."

"Then could you have left it in the cab, or dropped it in the street?"

"I suppose I must have done so," he answered slowly and without conviction.

"What an awful thing!" said Cecilia, honestly. "I *am* sorry. Believe me—I think I can guess—how you must feel the loss of a last message—from so dear a friend."

Hawe gave her another of his quick glances.

"Oh, yes," he said, absent-mindedly, "thanks; yes, but you can't just know——"

Maisie suddenly entered the room.

"And I really very seldom get home till about six o'clock," Cecilia was remarking to cover the abrupt silence.

Hawe was slightly bewildered. "From your work—oh! indeed."

A little later he rose to depart.

His leave-taking performed, Maisie was about to accompany him to the front door, when, from the end of the passage, Irene appeared to fulfil her obligations.

"Well, good-bye," repeated the younger Miss Courtfield, smilingly, gave her hand for the second time, and retreated within the sitting-room. The lady-help proceeded to speed the parting guest.

"Good-afternoon," she said again, as she opened the door for his exit.

Hawe, invariably polite to women, raised his hat, smiled, and said, "Good afternoon."

Just as he stood ready to descend the stairs, he was aware that she had followed him on to the landing.

"'Scuse me," she said quickly, "but are you still stying in Wigmore Street?"

"Yes," said Hawe in amazement. "Why?"

"Number 1000? 'S that your permanent address?"

"Well, yes—permanent for the next three months—but—whatever——"

"Thanks," said Irene, and whisked within the flat and banged the door, before he could ask the reason of her curiosity.

CHAPTER X.

SIX weeks passed. The acquaintanceship of Sidney Hawe with the Courtfields grew and thrived. In the case of the elder sister, it had sprung into a friendly mutual regard. Hawe liked Cecilia for her brusque good-nature, and for her unselfishness, honesty and disregard of convention. Her personality was too masculine, her outlook too wide, for the sentiment she inspired in those she met ever to be lukewarm. The acquaintances of Cecilia always either liked and admired her whole-heartedly or hated her with an equal fervour. She possessed no power of pleasing, little tact and a limited *savoir faire*.

For Hawe she had conceived a frank and simple respect, that had originated in the unconventional circumstances of their first meeting. She had felt admiration of his tact under trying conditions, gratitude for his sympathy, pity for the physical inability that had overtaken him, but above and beyond these sentiments was the interest offered by the presumption, that his friendship with Jim Reesdale had been a close and intimate relation. There had been ground for the surmise. In the years after Hawe's absence from England, the younger man had not permitted the acquaintanceship to drop, but had insisted upon keeping up a correspondence, to which Sidney contributed rarely at first, but with more regularity as absence lent a glamour to past association and time consolidated a sense of comradeship. At the same time, no sympathy ever existed between the two men. Their letters were characteristic. Hawe would write curtly, with grudging patronage, giving occasional bare information as to his mode of life, sometimes even condescending to offer advice in the matter of monetary investments. Reesdale's letters would be lengthy, rambling, ill expressed

and badly written, containing details of a particularly limited and uninteresting life, and revealing unreservedly the workings of a commonplace imagination and an essentially narrow intelligence. More often than not, these communications would be burnt unread by the recipient.

In Reesdale's fancy, however, the mere fact of the correspondence was magnified to a proof of intimacy—the acquaintanceship was exaggerated to a close tie of mutual friendliness. As a matter of course, he confided in the Courtfields, who grew accustomed to hear on his lips Hawe's name. Jim would speak of "My dear old friend, Sidney," till eventually Cecilia, at least, assumed that a bond, more than brotherly in its strength, existed between the two men.

Hence the reason of the welcome she had accorded to Hawe on his first appearance, and her readiness to approve his actions and words. For his part, he failed to altogether understand the situation. He was too simple a man to seek for reasons in the evidence of a woman's regard, and although he was not slow to realise that Miss Courtfield imagined the relation that had existed between himself and Maisie's lover to have been entirely sympathetic, he had no thought of tracing to such a cause the effect of Cecilia's liking.

On occasions, as the friendship grew and any reference was made to the dead man, Hawe had the impulse to deny the inferred intimacy, but checked the negation of her surmise with the thought that it could only wound her susceptibilities, and that, for secrecy, there was more excuse than for speech that must disprove the statements of a silenced tongue. At the same time these occasions were rare. Cecilia seldom spoke of the dead man, and in Hawe's presence Maisie never mentioned Reesdale's name.

In the meanwhile, Sidney became gradually conscious that the girl had aroused within him a tender feeling that had been born of a protective desire. He was careful, however, to betray nothing of his sentiments. On the frequent visits he paid to the flat in Rosemore

Mansions, he merely evinced for Maisie an admiration that was due to her beauty, and a particular gentle courtesy of manner, that was only befitting, in his attitude towards one who had known grave trouble.

As a matter of fact, the younger Miss Courtfield belonged to the feminine type who can find vent for their grief in tears. To her, concealment of sorrow was a practice beyond imagination. Her grief was washed away in the salt flood of her weeping, and almost the remembrance of having suffered soon faded to oblivion. Her mind became occupied by a fresh interest. Hawe had come into her life as a new object whereon she might focus her attention—even (though this was unconfessed) a new personality upon whom she could practise her attractions. She regarded him from an essentially selfish standpoint, was flattered by his palpable admiration, and, at heart, piqued that he should never betray a keener interest.

During this period of six weeks, Sidney frequently met, besides the Courtfields, the woman by whom he had at one time thought all his life would be influenced. Pia Hamlyn was one of a particular social set in London with whose characteristics Hawe, after his wanderings, felt himself unfamiliar. In the circle of friends and acquaintances who foregathered in the drawing-room of her house in Sloane Street, he observed that the majority of the women seemed to belong to a peculiar type, whose intellects were of the shallowest, their clothes of the most picturesque, and their tastes of the most extravagant, while the men were conspicuous by their scarcity, and, whenever present, aroused in Sidney pugilistic desires. They were generally faultlessly groomed, extraordinarily dis-courteous, and appeared to be either too indolent to be dissipated, or too dissipated to be indolent. Men and women alike held "Vagueness" as a cult. Their actions were undetermined, and in their conversation they brought a surface wit to bear on deepest subjects, while their interests centred round the occult or the ills and diseases of the human system. Hawe's sensations

on the first occasion, when, in the company of three women he was dragged into a discussion of the origin and development of appendicitis, were beyond description. He had accompanied Pia on a Saturday afternoon down to Ranelagh. As they sat, at tea-time, at one of the little tables on the lawn, they were joined by two of Mrs. Hamlyn's friends, one a tall, reed-like creature (Hawe wondered whether the figures of all well-dressed London women showed this unvarying flat slenderness), whose auburn hair was coiled so low on her neck that any undue movement of her head might have unwound it and allowed it to fall down her back; the other an equally tall and slim brunette.

"Why, hullo!" said Mrs. Hamlyn, when she saw them, "I thought you two were motoring to-day. Come and sit down and play with us. This is my friend Toby." She indicated Hawe. "I never can remember your silly surname," she added, screwing up her eyes at him. "Lady Betty Hoskins and Dot," she went on with an impartial wave of the hand towards her friends, and an apparent faith in his judgment to distinguish between the two. He lifted his hat silently, drew up some more chairs and resumed his own seat.

"I meant to run out of town on the motor to-day," said the red-haired lady languidly, and looked away from them through a single, gold-rimmed quizzing-glass, "but the chauffeur's gone and got appendicitis. Isn't it sickenin'?"

"I believe it's catching," said the dark-haired girl, leaning her elbows on the table. "I'm so thankful I've had it, and got rid of mine." Her intonation was almost babyish. "Have you been operated on?" she asked, turning to Hawe, who laughed and fidgeted rather nervously with his stick.

"No," he said; "never."

"Oh! they had to cut me open twice," she continued sweetly. "I was awfully bad. I nearly died. You see, it had been going on for years, only I didn't know it. I thought it was liver; you know, when you do feel

seedy, and have got a fearful pain, you do think it's liver, don't you?"

"Yes," said Hawe—"of course—oh, yes——"

"Well, and then when they began to talk about it, of course I knew, and my husband didn't want me to go in for the operation at all, but I was quite keen, and it *was* so interesting. I wasn't at all frightened. They said afterwards that all the little tendons had become attached to the side, don't you know, and they had to cut——"

"And Peter says that's what comes of giving chauffeurs such high salaries," broke in the voice of the red-haired lady. "Ours can afford to go off and have appendicitis. I call it too sickenin'."

"D'you believe it is the one remaining trace of our monkey-days?" inquired the brunette, in a general way.

"The appendix?" said Pia. "Oh! I don't know. I always try to believe I haven't got one."

"There'll be a judgment on you," said the red-haired lady, looking round and smiling.

"Never mind; let's talk of something else," said Pia. "I'm tired of insides."

The conversation took a different turn, but Hawe did not soon forget how it had commenced. Mrs. Hamlyn's friends alarmed him, but Pia, herself, differed sufficiently from her set, for him still to find her attractive. She was vague to eccentricity, but less affected and more intelligent than the majority of her acquaintances. In speaking of her past life, she showed a reserve which won his respect, and gave him the opinion that the girl he had known and admired had developed into a woman of sufficient strength of mind not to prate of her troubles. From her very silence, he deduced that her married life had been a particularly unhappy one. In her personal relation towards himself she varied. Sometimes she treated him with a frank and careless *camaraderie*; on other occasions she appeared to put forth all her power to please him, but succeeded more in repelling than in fascinating him. Hawe had been in love with her, but

had never been truly fond of her ; he had never given her that affection of the mind which alone endures, and after a lapse of time can find excuse for feminine blandishments, long since unnecessary in their object. Formerly Pia's coquetries had the charm of freshness ; now they brought only the suggestion that they had been perfected and spoilt, in practice upon other men.

Her only charm that still had power to give him a faint elusive thrill was her musical talent. On the piano, her touch was perfect ; she possessed a soft, somewhat husky, but exquisitely sweet contralto voice, in whose attractions she put no faith, and for that reason used it seldom, and only when, alone in Hawe's company, he begged her to sing. At such moments she would drop all affectation, and unconsciously would regain over him some of her old fascination.

Nevertheless, no feeling warmer than a friendly liking for her ever remained with him. He thought he had reached a true comprehension of her character. A woman of many moods and few principles, vain and frivolous, yet the possessor of a sufficiently intelligent and observant mind ; generous towards the failings of her friends, extravagant in her ideas, and apparently ignorant of the influence of any great affection. At the end of the time, during which they had renewed their old intimacy, Hawe came to the conclusion that the one creature upon whom Pia lavished any real love, was her tiny brown Pom dog, "Cachou." She would call the beast "her darling, her treasure, her baby" ; she carried it with her everywhere, and talked to it as though it were a child. She boasted of the fact that at night it slept with her beneath the bed-clothes. Hawe marvelled that her single devotion should have for object merely a fashionable pet. It did not occur to him that therein lay an evidence of her loneliness, and a proof that the strength of her love had never had any other outlet.

On a certain morning in the first week of June, Hawe discovered on his breakfast-table three letters, all of which were addressed in characteristically feminine

handwriting. One he recognised as being from Pia, another he guessed had been penned by Maisie Courtfield, but the third was strange to him. He opened first the girl's letter. It was written on cheap Silurian note-paper, in a round, somewhat youthful, and very upright hand, with curly capitals and occasional flourishes.

"MY DEAR MR. HAWE," it ran,— "Thank you very much for your letter. I should *love* to go to a *matinée* with you on Saturday—especially of the piece you suggest. By all means let us meet in the vestibule of the theatre. You may be sure I will be quite punctual. I hope it will be a fine day, don't you? Cecilia sends kind regards, in which I join, and believe me,

"Yours sincerely,

"MAISIE COURTFIELD."

Hawe lingered over this epistle and foolishly repeated the signature over beneath his breath several times. "Dear little girl, how ripping it will be to take her out!" he thought. "And how sweet of her to agree so naturally, when we have only known each other a few months."

He put the letter carefully away in a pocket-book, and tore open the envelope which bore Pia's sprawling superscription. She wrote an eccentric and exaggerated hand on thick parchment-like blue paper, which bore in the top left-hand corner a little scarlet medalion, enclosing her initials in silver. The address was printed in scarlet type. Below it—"Dear Toby," she had written, with a careless splutter of her pen; then the communication continued in thick black, forward-sloping strokes, the width of the page scarcely holding three words:

"Would you care about coming down to my cottage at Maidenhead from next Saturday to Monday? I shall have a small party down there to *chaperone* us. Peter is coming—I can't remember if you've met him—and Lady Betty Hoskins, who's bringing her latest acquisition in the baby-snatching line, a little boy up from Aldershot, who reminds me

rather of what you used to be. Mind you come. I shall expect you about lunch-time. I'm going to motor down in the morning. The others are coming in the afternoon.

"In tearing haste, Yours,

"P. H.

"P.S.—I don't believe you know the name of the cottage. It's called 'Lock Lodge'—anyone at the station will tell you the way."

Hawe laughed as he came to the end of the letter, made a mental note of answering it in the affirmative, with the reservation that he must postpone his arrival at Maidenhead till the evening, as his day would be occupied with Maisie; then, tearing the parchment-like sheet across, and throwing it aside, he turned his attention to the remaining missive. It was enclosed in a highly-glazed white envelope, which was addressed in an ill-bred hand, and bore on its pointed flap the print of dirty finger-marks. He regarded it for a few moments wonderingly, noted that the postmark was of Kensington, and presently opened and read the blotted and ill-spelt letter.

"DEAR SIR,—I am not supposing you will conect my name with the occasion of our frequent meetings."

(Hawe glanced over the page to the signature, without feeling any the wiser; then proceeded.)

"Thro' family losses, my Father being dead, I finds myself in service and am Ladyelp"—(Hawe puzzled over this word)—"to miss Courtfield. This to show I am highly Respectable and my objec in writing has reason as follows. When you first came to our Flat you may recolect being taken ill on kitchen floor I went for dr. Brassy living below he comes you recover and go off. After your going, I finds on same kitchen floor a letter and Envelope, same being adressed to you tho' then not Knowing your name I was not aware. I reades it to gain information and Discovers your secret. Miss c. arsk me if I seen letter which I deny and keep

same till I can settel what to do. I have now consulted with a Friend who advises as follows—You being now very friendly with miss c. and extra friendly with miss masie, you will prefer for them not to know about Letter therefor you will wish to have same returned back, tho' you must know I cannot do so without receiving payment for Silence being onest by nature. My Friend says it will be best if you will meet me one day to discus buisness, therefor I will be happy to meet you any hour on friday afternoon next, wich will be my day out for to go down to Mitcham to see my Sister who can wait. This Letter is strickly Privat and my Friend says you will not be such a fool as to menshon it to miss courtfield, as if so I will at once tell her what I know and my Friend says it will not raise you in her oppinion. Oping you will see it in this Lite and that we will meet in Park or elsewere on friday to discus Payment, I remain, Dear Sir

“Sin—ly yrs

“IRENE SPRATT.”

After reading this communication through once, Hawe perused it a second time; then sat as though deep in thought, staring at the sheet of notepaper in his hand. When an interval had elapsed, he murmured a single ejaculation, and thrusting the missive into his coat-pocket began to pace the room in some excitement.

Before the day had drawn to an end, Irene Spratt received in answer to her epistle, the following note.

“DEAR MISS SPRATT,—I trust you will pardon the informality of my thus addressing you, in reply to your letter. I cannot but feel that we are already known to one another, and did not, for a moment, fail to remember your name. I shall be happy to continue our acquaintance, under more auspicious circumstances than we have yet enjoyed, and welcome your proposal of an assignation on Friday afternoon with delight. I suggest Kensington Gardens as a more favourable meeting place than Hyde Park. If I do not hear from you

to the contrary, I will be standing immediately beneath the Queen's Statue, near the Palace, at four o'clock on the day you name. Coupled with my desire to meet you again, is quite a keen anxiety to share with you the knowledge of the secret you suppose to be mine.

"Believe me, very truly,

"SIDNEY HAWK."

CHAPTER XI.

ON Friday afternoon, Sidney Hawe strolled across Hyde Park, towards Kensington Gardens, with the object of keeping his appointment with Irene Spratt. He took his way leisurely, traversing the green spaces of grass, with hands clasped behind his back and his stick swinging idly between his fingers. He appeared to be lost in thorough and unqualified enjoyment of the beauty of the day and of his surroundings. He went out of his way to wander in the direction of the Round Pond, and paused on the bank to watch a party of men and lads who were trying to sail a finely modelled toy yacht across the water. He regarded the group, as though all his interest was centred in their efforts. Then his attention was turned to a small boy in a sailor suit, whose miniature boat had escaped from his control. The child's anxiety to regain the tiny vessel, which scudded gallantly along, just out of his reach, before a breeze that ruffled the surface of the pond, was obvious.

"What hard luck!" said Hawe, as sympathetically as though the loss were his own. The small boy looked up into his face.

"I can't reach her," he said dolefully.

"I'll have a try," returned Hawe, and advanced to the edge of the pond. He stretched out his stick and brought the craft to land.

"Thanks awfully," said the little boy, and went down on his knees to pick up the toy.

"No harm come to her, has there?" said the man.

"Oh, no; she's a good water-tight boat," returned her owner gravely.

"She looks that," said Hawe. "Let's try sailing her again."

The yacht was put back in the water, and for about

ten minutes, they lingered together at the game. Then Hawe pulled out his watch.

"By Jove!" he said. "It's four o'clock. I'm afraid I must go."

"Will you be here other afternoons?" inquired the small boy wistfully.

"You bet I will, if I can. So long."

The man nodded, and went off in the direction of Kensington Palace. When he was in sight of the marble statue of Queen Victoria, he perceived the figure of a woman who was walking up and down the deserted path. He quickened his steps, advanced towards her, and lifted his hat. Irene (for it was she, clad in the purple dress and yellow hat) paused in her walk, and stared at him rather sheepishly. In one hand she clutched a bone-handled umbrella; in the other a fold of her skirt, inadequate to raise the hem from the ground. A nosegay, composed of one dilapidated red rose, some spiræ and a sprig of maidenhair fern, was fastened in the front of her bodice.

"Good afternoon," said Hawe politely. "I do hope I haven't kept you waiting."

"Good afternoon," returned Irene, and after a side-long glance in his direction, gazed straight ahead, and relapsed into silence.

With his stick the man poked a little hole in the gravel at his feet. For a moment he contemplated it intently. Then he looked up suddenly into the face of the lady-help. His mouth quivered into a very slight smile.

"What a lovely day, isn't it!" he observed. "Supposing we walk a little way across the Gardens."

Irene clutched her skirt and umbrella with renewed firmness, and without responding, moved forward. Her expression was quite vacuous, but her cheeks were faintly pink, as though they had caught the glow of an inward fire of excitement. Hawe stepped by her side. She had chosen a northerly direction. Then an impulse prompted him to glance back over his shoulder. At a little distance from them, a very young man in a tweed suit and billycock hat lingered beneath the Palace

wall, and seemed to regard them with attention. Hawe stopped.

"Is that your friend?" he asked abruptly, indicating with a nod the loitering figure.

Irene's colour deepened. "My friend?" she repeated, after a moment's hesitation.

"No doubt the friend who has helped you with his advice?" said Hawe, helpfully.

Irene giggled. "No-w," she answered. "That ain't no friend o' mine."

"Oh!" said Hawe; "I thought he looked as if he knew you."

He fixed his gaze on the very young man, who stood sucking the handle of his cane and stolidly regarding them.

After a moment—"Are you sure you don't know him?" continued Hawe. "He looks—well, he looks just as though he were waiting for you to bow."

"I tell you we ain't acquainted," returned Irene, and met the stare of the very young man with a fierce glance.

"Oh, then please forgive the supposition," said Hawe. "Probably he's one of those impertinent fellows who would accost a lady without an introduction."

Miss Spratt giggled again. "'E ain't got no cheek: there's no 'arm in 'im," she said.

"Indeed. Then you have some knowledge of him?" Hawe paused effectively; then added in an almost pained tone, "I thought our interview was to be quite private and confidential. That can scarcely be if we are to have a *chaperon*."

"'E ain't comin' along of us," protested Irene, looking sulky. "There's no 'arm in 'im."

"So you said before. But even if he doesn't accompany us, I think to be followed is apt to check one's freedom, don't you?"

"I tol' 'im to stay be'ind," said Irene, frowning now at the tweed-clad figure in the background. "I can manage my own haffairs, says I, an' I don't want none o' you."

"One of your admirers?" said Hawe diffidently.

"'E's my young man," returned Irene. "In the vegetables, 'e is."

"Perhaps he doesn't approve of your having come out to meet me."

She eyed the speaker disdainfully. "Go 'n," she said. "Don't you go a'fancying yerself. And 'im—well, you stay 'ere while I jus' go and give 'im a piece o' my mind—the turnip!"

She spoke the last epithet with ineffable scorn, then walked towards the very young man, and spoke to him in tones too low for Hawe to overhear, though he gathered their purport from the fact that the "friend" presently slouched away down the path, in the direction of Kensington High Street.

The lady-help rejoined Sidney, and together, in silence, they watched the retreat of the tweed-clad figure. Then side by side they once more moved on their way.

"Was he, after all, the friend who acted as your adviser?" said Hawe.

"We thought of it equal," she answered after a moment.

"Oh, really!" he said in an interested tone.

"But 'twas me that kept the writin' what you left on the kitchen floor," she continued, becoming unexpectedly confidential.

"Of course, that was clever of you——" he observed. "Then did it occur to you that it might be worth something?"

Irene smiled broadly. "Well, I read it," she said weightily. She paused—then continued, as though labouring under some excitement, "I read it, that sime d'y—direckly you had got out o' the flat." As her interest and agitation rose, her cockney accent became more pronounced. "An'—when I understan's what it was about—I says to meself—I says—'Irene Spratt,' I says—'here's a bit o' writin' what the man who's lost it—would give somethin' to get back. It's a proof,' says I to meself—'that 'e ain't str'ight——. There's been a time when 'e's behaved in a partic'ler low down w'y——'"

The lady-help, having expressed herself precipitately, now paused for breath. There was a silence. Then Hawe's answer came, quiet and guarded. "You seem quite convinced of your deduction?"

Irene, panting, looked up into his face, and scowled. "Go 'n—with your long words," she said sulkily.

"I beg your pardon," he said smiling. "I meant—you seem to imagine that there is proof of my not having played fair by the author of the letter?"

"You can't say as there isn't any reason for thinkin' it," said Irene with a return to coolness and less excited speech.

"Then perhaps you would state your reason," said Hawe formally.

Irene hesitated. Then, "It's in the writin'," she replied.

Hawe laughed. "And you wish me to buy your silence, with regard to the opinion you have formed of me—while, at the same time, you give me but the vaguest idea of the nature of that opinion? I understand that you think me a blackguard—'not straight,' anyway. I only wish to know how you came to such an estimation of my character, and whether you can tell me what I've done to deserve your blame?"

Irene suddenly stopped in the path. She lifted to the man a face suffused with crimson. With eyes and mouth wide open, she seemed more than ever to lack any intelligence.

"Oh! please don't blush," said Hawe softly and banteringly. "Your face is the colour of the pretty rose you are wearing. If I have caused you to feel ill at ease, allow me to apologise. Suppose we drop a subject that can interest neither of us——"

"No, thanks," interposed the lady-help, abruptly. "D'you think——" she added, and the angry colour suddenly faded from her face, leaving the complexion sallow, while into her eyes stole an unexpected expression of slyness. "D'you think I don't know that you're tryin' to bluff?"

Hawe did not reply. Though the smile never left his

lips, they became more firmly compressed, and he fixed an intent gaze on the face of the woman.

"Oh! you rile me," she continued, with vehemence, after a short pause. "But it ain't no use—you m'y's well drop your gammon."

Once more they stood facing each other in the path, and he was drawing diagrams with the point of his stick on the gravel.

"I think," he said slowly, at last, "that you misunderstand me. Nothing could be further from my intention than to deceive you as to my mood. But—I am really anxious to know what is in your mind. You forget that it is nearly three months since I saw that incriminating letter."

"Shouldn't 'ave thought meself that you'd 'ave wanted to be put in mind of what the poor gentleman wrote," said Irene meditatively. Her wording was sometimes abstruse, and conveyed the idea that she struggled to express her scorn without losing her temper. "I ain't forgettin'," she added, "that after a'-readin' of it fust, it struck you so much all of a 'eap, that you finted aw'y."

"Yet, as far as I can remember, you were not present," said Hawe quickly. "I must say you have a most surprising habit of jumping to conclusions."

"Which it's most useful 'slong as I jumps str'ight," said Irene smartly.

"How far more clever you are than I should ever have been justified in thinking you," said Hawe, and regarded her with his head a little on one side.

"Go'n," she said, snorting.

He gave her a conciliatory smile, then took out his watch.

"D'you know," he said, "it's half-past four. What time do you usually have tea? I begin to feel the want of mine. What do you say to our strolling across to that little place near the Alexandra Gate, where food and refreshment can be obtained?"

Irene stared.

"Let's go and have tea together," he continued

amiably. "There's no quarrel between us, is there And a meal is an aid to business conversation. Won't you come?"

The suspicion that marked Irene's expression gave place to a slow and grudging smile.

"Well—you are——" she began, and broke off to eye him steadily. "Oh, Lor!" she added, with a sudden sly chuckle "I know your gime; you're tryin' to get roun' me."

"Whatever my motives, surely they should not prevent our having tea?"

"I don't mind," she allowed, and gave a gay wriggle of her shoulders.

They set off at a quick pace, in the direction of the pavilion near the Alexandra Gate.

"Now, let us continue our mutual explanations," said Hawe, as they walked. "You refuse to believe that I can have forgotten the subject of the letter, that has remained in your keeping since the day when first I read it."

"I think that the gentleman who wrote it didn't mean you to forget his last message in a 'urry," she replied.

"Please tell me first how you knew who wrote it?"

"Then you recollect that there weren't no nime at the end?"

"Yes," said Hawe, "I remember that point. Did Miss Courtfield tell you that Mr. Reesdale was the author?"

"Yes. She says to me, she says—'Irene,' she says, 'Mr. 'Awe, what was 'ere the other d'y, 'as lost a letter that was sent 'im from pore Mr. Reesdale, it 'aving been found in the young gentleman's pocket when 'e was run over by the motor 'bus, and sent to the address on the henvelope. Mr. 'Awe,' she says, 'is in a great w'y about it; 'e thinks 'e must have left the letter 'ere; Mr. Reesdale was 'is grittest frien',' she says, 'and Mr. 'Awe was horful hupset when fust he read that message!'" Irene paused, and gave her companion one of her sly sidelong glances; then continued: "But I thinks—'Sure, from what Mr. Reesdale wrote, I

shouldn't have said they two were frien'ly—leastwise, that there last message weren't partic'lar lovin'—unless for one gentleman to call another 'thief,' and to s'y, 'with my las' breath, I'll curse your memory.' Ah!" she added, after a moment, "I thought you couldn't quite 'ave forgot the words."

Hawe's face had grown mottled, brown and white in colour, his eyes stared straight ahead, and beneath his moustache his teeth were closed over his lower lip. He moved forward faster, as though he sought to escape from the danger of a recollection. Irene ran to keep pace with his long steps. She continued speaking with her prominent light-coloured eyes fixed on his face.

"You see, I read the letter," she said, "and it strikes me, readin' it agin, that it's all about some swindle by which Mr. Reesdile'd suffered, and that 'is *frien'* 'ad played low down on 'im. And it strikes me——"

Hawe gave vent, suddenly, between his teeth, to a muttered exclamation.

"I thought p'r'aps you needed remindin' what 'twas all about," said Irene, unperturbed. "I thought p'r'aps you didn't recollect' that the writin' says: 'Are you satisfied now you ruined me?' and 'There isn't nothin' lef' for me but suicide, and you'll 'ave my death at your door?'"

"It's a damned lie!" interposed Hawe, fiercely.

"Oh, Lor! how you do swear!" said Irene. "An' what do you do it for, and why do you look like that, if I've not been speakin' the truth. Go'n with you!" she repeated with a laugh; "I'm 'onest, I am! Bet *you* can't say as much!"

Hawe turned on her with an almost animal snarl.

"You're the devil!" he said; "the devil. If we were in a lonelier place——"

Irene's eyes protruded more than ever.

"We aren't," she interrupted sharply; then with a return to her former tone: "Oh! you are a buck!" she said. "Where's your fine gentleman manners? You're a tikin' me out to tea! Don't you forget it! Where's your bluff? Oh, Lor!"

The man seemed to make a great effort after self-control. Then in his usual slow, incisive tones: "Thanks for the reminder," he said; and, after another pause: "We arrive now at the question of your object. Kindly tell me what you want, and why you want it."

"Are we still a-goin' out to tea together?" inquired Irene.

Hawe looked round. "I think this is the place," he said. "Shall we cross the road?"

They passed from the path, through one of the gates set in the iron railings that divide the turf from the roadway. The pavilion stood before them. On the grass were set little round tables and groups of chairs. A middle-class family party, consisting of a man, his wife and three children, one of whom was crying, partook at one of the tables of tea and bread-and-butter. A dirty waiter, with a supercilious air, and a battered straw hat on the back of his head, stood in the background. Otherwise the place was deserted—a wilderness screened from the world without, where carriages and pedestrians passed. Hawe sat down on the nearest chair at a table, above which was spread a big red and white umbrella. Irene followed his example. He beckoned to the supercilious waiter.

Turning to the lady-help: "Will you have tea," he said, "or would you prefer an ice?"

"Thanks," said Irene; "I'll have tea."

Hawe, having given the order, leant back in his seat and gazed into the green distance.

The child of the family party continued to howl.

Irene watched her companion narrowly. His face had a sallow tint, and one of his hands lay clenched upon the table. Presently she broke the silence that had fallen between them.

"You arxed me—" she began; and stopped, as though suddenly nervous.

"I didn't speak," returned Hawe, glancing at her with raised eyebrows.

With his return to composure, her own coolness seemed to have deserted her.

"Jus' now," she said, "you were s'yin'—you wanted to know——"

"Ah, yes," he said evenly, "the object of our recent conversation. Quite so. Perhaps you will tell me."

"I gave you to understan'—when I wrote," she said, and paused again.

He made no attempt to speak, but regarded her steadily.

"You got to p'y me to s'y nothin' about that there letter from Reesdile," she blurted forth, with a touch of her former bravado.

The waiter reappeared, placed a teapot, a smutty cup and saucer and a cake on a plate before Irene; then retreated.

When his back was turned Hawe answered slowly, "Still I don't quite understand. Why should I pay you?"

"Oh! I ain't the fool you take me for," she returned quickly. "Don' I know you're wishful to stand frien'ly with Miss Courtfield? Don' I know that you're after carryin' on with Miss Maisie——"

"I hope," interposed Hawe, "that you will find the tea to your taste."

Irene lifted the pot.

"Ain't you goin' to have some?" she asked.

He shook his head.

"Then, I am to conclude that you will show that letter to Miss Courtfield, in the event of my refusing to buy it from you?" he said at last.

Irene munched the cake.

"That's it," she said, with her mouth full.

Hawe regarded her quizzically.

"The idea does you infinite credit," he observed. "I find it hard to believe that you thought of it alone."

The lady-help suddenly blushed, and strove to hide her rising colour in her teacup. Then, swallowing—

"I tol' you we thought of it equal," she replied.

"We?" Hawe seized on the word.

"Me an' my young man, what you saw," said Irene. "'E's a sharp un, is Halbert—'e's in the vegetables."

"Quite so," said Hawe. "And you consulted him?"

"I showed 'im the writin', and he says, 'There's money in that,' 'e says—'an' we'll share,' 'e says. . . . But I don't see," added Irene, with her furtive glance, "that that's any business o' yours."

"Oh, a matter of interest—nothing more," returned Hawe coolly.

Another silence fell on them. The man appeared lost in thought. Suddenly and quickly he leant towards the woman. "A fiver?" he said, in a low tone.

She put down the cup, that she was raising to her lips, eyed him and made a grimace.

"It's worth more'n that to you," she said.

Hawe's hand, that lay on the table, clenched and unclenched spasmodically.

"What'll you take?" he said eventually.

Irene leant back in her chair.

The child of the middle-class family had, at last, been pacified with cake. A sense of supreme peace, only intensified by the distant roar of traffic, lay on the green spaces of Kensington Gardens. The day was typical of June.

Irene pushed away her plate, sucked her teeth, and spoke. "Ten poun'," she said.

"Very well," said the man, and having spoken, set his lips, till they showed like a thin line of purple beneath his short moustache.

Irene smiled. "'Ave you brought the notes along?"

Hawe stared at her.

"We m'y's well settle now," she said. "P'r'aps you didn't think I'd 'ave got the bloomin' letter on me?"

Her smile broadened; her vacuous expression had quite given place to one where cunning and triumph mingled. Her yellow hat had fallen to one side of her head.

"Lor!" she exclaimed, "d'you s'pose I'd trust you by post?"

Hawe did not speak, but stretched his hand across the table. His fingers quivered.

Irene shook her head. "Nor into your 'and, till I get the money fust."

He fumbled for a pocket-book, and taking from it two five-pound notes, slapped the paper down on the table. His face was dark with fury.

"There!—curse you!" he muttered. "Now give me the letter."

She had taken it from the pocket of her purple dress, and, picking up first the payment he had lain down, passed him the envelope that bore his name and address in Reesdale's writing.

He grabbed it from her fingers.

She flung back her head with a snort.

"Call yerself a gentleman?" she said.

Hawe glanced within the envelope, to see that it contained the letter; then put the dearly-bought missive in his pocket. Thereupon he glanced across at the lady-help, and his face cleared. The expression of suppressed passion gave place to a glimmer of irresistible amusement. He appeared for several seconds to ponder her last remark. Then, slowly and almost weightily, he replied, "A gentleman? Ah, well, I have always considered that rather a relative term, don't you know!"

CHAPTER XII.

"Oh! aren't you simply dying for the piece to begin?" said Maisie.

"Well, no, I don't think I am," returned Hawe. "When they raise the curtain, the theatre will be in darkness——"

"Of course, but I don't see——"

"Exactly," he interposed quickly. "When the lights are out, I shall not be able to see either."

As he spoke, he looked at her with intention.

The girl laughed. "What nonsense you talk!" she said, and manœuvred her eyelashes.

They were seated in the stalls of one of the London theatres, which was gradually filling for the Saturday *matinée* to view the performance of a romantic comedy, with a popular actor-manager in the leading part. As had been arranged, Hawe had met Maisie in the vestibule. She had arrived first at the meeting-place, and on his arrival, in answer to his apologetic protestations, had said naïvely, "Never mind, as long as the play hasn't begun. I couldn't bear to miss a word of it, could you?"

They had to wait ten minutes for the raising of the curtain.

Hawe did not find the play of such overwhelming interest as he had been led to expect. During its progress, he alternately sought, by the dim light, to read his programme, and to study the profile of the girl at his side.

Maisie was frankly enthusiastic. At crises of the plot she leaned forward with strained attention in her chair; at moments when the action was in a lighter vein, she smiled, clapped her hands softly, and sometimes even nodded her head to express her appreciation.

Her undisguised delight in the entertainment gratified

even while it amused the man. As his view grew accustomed to the surrounding darkness he watched, with the keenest pleasure, the expressive play of her features. Once or twice, during the first act, he leant towards her with a whispered comment or a low question, but always, in reply, she returned him only a gesture or the briefest of answers, and gave him to understand that she preferred his silence. When the curtain had once been lowered, she turned to him with a glowing face.

"Isn't it splendid!" she said.

He smiled. "Are you enjoying yourself?"

"Can you ask?"

She began a discussion of the piece. To-day, as on many previous occasions, Hawe was the attentive and sympathetic listener to Maisie's conversation. He was a man of sufficient reserve to find pleasure in the *rôle*. He needed to be drawn towards an interchange of ideas or an argument, before he would ever attempt to express his opinions or talk of his experiences. As he had once said to Maisie, his past life had been marked more by deeds than by words. He himself realised that only with a conversationalist of supreme tact or a particularly familiar friend could he bring himself to reveal his mind. He was sometimes conscious that the girl beside him (whose interests, compared with his own, were assuredly petty and wholly opposite) lacked that essential evidence of sympathy which he required. She was too positive of her own limited ideas. Hawe even recognised her as an egoist, and though he believed that every woman at heart holds self-consideration first, he had been aware of a dim surprise at knowing himself to be attracted by a personality in which the trait was so developed. He could not think that egoism was equally pronounced in the character of all the weaker sex. His opinion of Pia Hamlyn contradicted the idea. The woman was of entirely a different type to the girl—broad-minded where the other was narrow, and the possessor, to his mind, of finer instincts. To bear on his own moods Pia brought a subtle comprehension, that was seldom evidenced by Maisie.

Yet, in spite of all, Hawe believed that his old love was dead, and that he was drifting towards a new and stronger passion, that should have for object a young and inexperienced girl. Therein lay his excuse. Her youth, her inexperience, her very limitations were for him magnetic. He knew himself. In consciousness of his own strength, and in knowledge of their contrasting characters, lay a subtle charm. Thus, in a man's case, love, backed by self-esteem, grows doubly powerful. Fascinated as well by her beauty and entertained by her *naïveté*, Hawe told himself that these were the essentials of personal charm, and that therefore she was as near perfection as it is possible for a woman to attain. He was like a man, influenced by a fancy of his own creation. Alternately, she was for him faulty and faultless. Then he would recur to the supreme argument—"In either case, she is lovable."

During the last *entr'acte* Hawe spoke to the girl of his intended visit to Maidenhead.

"Will you think me awfully rude if I don't see you home?" he said. "After we've had tea I must catch my train from Paddington."

"Will you have time?"

"Oh, yes, I expect so," he answered nonchalantly.

"I can't imagine you ever running down a platform, or exciting yourself in any way, because you were late," she said.

"Don't try," he returned. "You're right. I bar hurrying. I always leave punctuality to chance. On the whole I'm wonderfully lucky. Trains and steamers and things very seldom seem to miss me."

"That's rather a nice way of putting it."

"It's only obvious," he said. "After all, means of locomotion were made for man, and not *vice versa*. I therefore hold that, unlike time and tide, they should be content to wait."

"You speak," she said, "as though you were the only man."

"Oh," he returned quickly, with a little laugh, "that is what we all like to consider ourselves."

"Surely a selfish standpoint?"

"You've brought the same accusation against me before now."

"With reason."

"Undoubtedly."

"Are you going to stay with friends down at Maidenhead?" she asked.

"With a very old friend, a lady I have known for a good many years."

"Ah, indeed!"

He detected a faint pique in her tone. A sense of mischief, and a desire to arouse within her a slight jealousy seized him.

"I think she is quite my dearest friend," he said.

"She used to be the only woman I ever loved."

Maisie flushed. "Really?" she said stiffly.

Hawe looked at her and smiled.

"When I was about twenty-five she broke my heart, by marrying someone else," he continued, contriving to speak seriously.

"How very sad!"

"Wasn't it? But since then my heart has mended, and is now as strong as ever. Even the join is no longer perceptible."

"Of course," said Maisie, "she's married."

Hawe made a little grimace and shrugged his shoulders.

"Ah, well!" he began, "she's free enough now, poor thing——"

"Oh!" said Maisie, with some curiosity, "a widow?"

"Not exactly. She—er—well, the marriage didn't turn out a success, you see. She—I mean—they—they're separated."

Under the girl's steadfast gaze, he felt unaccountably ill at ease. He wondered whether he had shocked her—whether he had gone too far in revealing Pia's circumstances. Yet he failed to see the harm. However innocent, Maisie must be aware that marriages are occasionally annulled. The girl, however, with hands folded in her lap, was blushing furiously. She lowered

her eyes and her pretty lips took on an almost prim expression. After a moment she spoke quite viciously:

"Oh! I see—she is—only *that* sort of person."

Hawe raised his eyebrows. "Really," he said hastily, "you don't understand. My friend is as straight as they're made. Her married life was very unhappy. *She* divorced her husband."

"Surely," said Maisie acidly, "that is the same thing."

"As what?"

"As—as——" The girl's face grew a deeper crimson. "In such affairs," she added, gazing straight before her, "the blame falls equally on the man and the woman."

Hawe stared. "D'you mean on the wife as on the husband?"

Maisie vouchsafed no answer.

"By Jove!" he added softly, "I never knew before how charitable the weaker sex can be to one another!"

At this juncture, fortunately, the curtain rose on the last act.

Under cover of the darkness Hawe sought to make his peace with the girl. He laid his hand suddenly over hers, on a pretext of taking the programme.

"I beg your pardon for what I said just now," he whispered. "I shouldn't have referred to the matter."

"What?" said Maisie. "H'sh! Please be quiet."

After the performance, from the reserve that marked her manner towards him, he guessed that he was not forgiven. He marvelled at the ways of women, but did not fail to make himself particularly agreeable.

As they sat together at some daintily-furnished tea-rooms near the theatre, her coldness thawed beneath his ingratiating manner.

"I have enjoyed myself," she said. "It is kind of you to have given me so much pleasure."

"Don't you know," he returned, "that in this, as in everything else, my motive has been purely selfish. Your enjoyment has been mine."

"Has it? How good of you to say so! All the same, I expect you will be glad to get out of town."

"In a way, yes; it'll be cool on the river."

"I hope you will enjoy yourself down at Maidenhead," she said nicely.

"Oh, I daresay it won't be bad, though more probably it'll be rather a boring party."

His tone was purposely nonchalant.

Maisie looked gratified.

"But I don't suppose you will be bored," she said. Her tone held a query.

"If only," said Hawe softly, "you were going to be there, too——"

"What nonsense!" she interposed, laughing, and asked him if he took sugar. Then, meeting his gaze, she added with pretty hesitation—

"Anyway, don't be too well amused."

"You dear!" murmured Hawe enthusiastically, and was aware of a secret amusement at the knowledge of her thought. He was convinced that she imagined he was going into temptation.

* * * * *

"Toby is a particularly peaceful person," said Pia languidly; "aren't you, Toby? Back me up. Don't say you want to play bridge."

"I don't," said Hawe. "I play too badly."

"And it's far too nice an evening for playing cards, anyway, isn't it? There, Betty, you see your proposition is vetoed."

"I'm sure I don't care," said the lady addressed. "I suggested playin' bridge because I'm so hot, and the game always makes me cold with fright." It was the hour after dinner. In the garden of Pia's riverside villa (by courtesy called a cottage) the house-party were gathered together on the lawn, that ran down to the water's edge. A space of grass was covered by a bright-coloured carpet, upon which easy-chairs of wicker-work had been placed. One was occupied by Pia; another by Hawe. A tall, dark-moustached man stretched his length, supporting himself on his elbow, across the rug at Mrs. Hamlyn's

feet. His back was towards her, his lips held an unlighted cigarette, and his eyes were closed.

In a gaily-tasselled hammock that swung from a bamboo stand on the turf itself, reclined the second woman of the party. Lady Betty Hoskins had resolved into the auburn-haired and loosely-coiffured dame, whom Hawe remembered to have met on a previous occasion at Ranelagh. "Her latest belonging in the baby-snatching line," according to Pia's description, proved to be a young man, who at the present moment lay back in his chair, with legs widely extended, and hands folded behind his head. His face was pink, his features were uncertain, there was a budding growth of light hair upon his upper and disdainful lip—he had all the appearance of a precociously vicious infant. At intervals he tilted his seat in the direction of the hammock, and stretched out a hand to swing it gently to and fro.

Lady Betty was enveloped in trailing soft green draperies, which overflowed her netted couch. She had stuck one shapely but fair-sized foot, in a green silk stocking and a scarlet leather shoe, into view, and seemed oblivious of showing as well a foam of white lace frills beneath her dress.

The Infant was of an age to take notice.

He remarked on the frills.

"Ba George!" he said. "How can women walk with all that fluffiness round their legs?"

Lady Betty swung her foot.

"Men may have been monkeys," she said, "but perhaps women were Cochin-China fowls."

The Infant guffawed.

"Of course hens, even at their fluffiest, wear divided skirts," continued Lady Betty lazily; "but you must allow somethin' for evolution. Petticoats are the survival of the fittest. How do you like my stockin's?"

"Rippin', ba George," said the Infant; "but why do you wear different coloured shoes?"

"I've got an Italian greyhound," she replied, "and I once had a very nice great-aunt of the same nationality, so my instincts are southern, and I wear red,

white and green—scarlet shoes, you see, and emerald stockings——”

“And white undies, ba George !”

He guffawed again at his own wit.

“Oh, you knowledgeable child!” said Lady Betty laughing.

“Has someone made a joke?” said the man at Pia’s feet, without moving.

“It’s only the Infant being facetious,” replied Mrs. Hamlyn.

The man sighed and closed his eyes. Pia touched his back with her foot. “You are too lazy for words, Peter,” she said.

“Don’t kick me,” said Peter. “At least I’m leading no one astray.”

“You can’t infer that the Infant has been doing so,” she answered.

“Oh, I don’t know,” he returned. “There was once a prophecy—‘A little child shall lead them’——”

“Don’t be blasphemous,” she said.

“My dear lady! Wherein have I sinned?”

“You quoted Scripture to libel childhood.”

“Did I? Well—let’s send the statement to *Truth*. A good libel’s as rare as a joke these days.”

“Oh, Peter, don’t be smart. You make me tired.”

“Start a restful topic of conversation, then.”

“The heat.”

“Good Heavens! Very well. It’s been very hot to-day.”

“Oh, you are unoriginal,” complained Pia. “I shall talk to Toby. What have you been doing with yourself in town this afternoon, Toby?”

“I went to a *matinée*,” he said.

“To the theatre—in this heat? The man’s mad! Why?”

“It was rather stuffy,” he confessed with a little laugh. “I went to be amused.”

“And were you?”

“Oh, yes, the experience was a novelty. I hadn’t been to an afternoon performance for more years than I can remember.”

"You refreshing creature! The way you talk always makes me feel as though a breeze were blowing on my face."

"Who's talking about a breeze?" said Peter drowsily. Then he rolled over on his back. "Blow on me, O breeze," he murmured.

"If you're hot, why don't you take the canoe out on the river?" said Pia smiling.

Peter sat up suddenly. "Will you come?" he said.

"No—you know I hate it. I'm always terrified of being upset, and there isn't room for my legs."

"Then come in the punt."

"I don't want to."

"You'd let me go out all alone?"

"You're big enough to take care of yourself. Run away and play."

"Ah, well!" sighed the man, and pulled himself to his feet. He stood over six feet and was proportionately broad. He stretched his elbows. Then, as he stood above Hawe—"Got a light on you?" he said.

Hawe dived his hands into his pockets to search for matches, then handed up his own half-smoked cigarette. Peter puffed till his own tobacco glowed, and returned the cigarette with a curt "Thanks."

"Why, Peter's actually standing up," said Lady Betty from the hammock. "What's the matter, Peter?"

"I'm going on the river," he answered, and without looking in her direction sauntered down to the water's edge, where at a miniature landing-stage several boats were tethered. They watched him detach a canoe and paddle away down stream. For a while Pia was silent.

Then—"Poor old Peter!" she said softly, and smiled.

Hawe looked questioning. She leant towards him.

"What time is it, Toby?"

He consulted his watch.

"Half-past nine," he said.

"Why, how light it stays, doesn't it?" she said.

It was dusk. The sky was a pale clear indigo. All the surrounding tints were faint and pure, like those of a water-colour drawing. In the west there still lingered

a primrose glow from the sunset. Overhead the first star twinkled tenderly. Nature was very still, as though at devotions. The gentle lap, lap of the water against the bank might have been a sleepy murmured prayer. Then, through the silence there rushed an electric launch with a gay party on board. A man was strumming "Hiawatha" on a banjo. A woman's laugh rang out vulgarly, and the words sounded clear across the water—"Wish we had room for a cakewalk!"

The calm of the evening was ruffled. Hawe turned to Pia for sympathy with his mood.

"Almost it makes one long for an uninhabited world, doesn't it?"

"Yes," she said dreamily; "a place where one could have continual peace."

"Pia," interposed Lady Betty, "Mr. St. Leger wants to bring his gramophone out here. D'you mind if he goes into the house and fetches it?"

Pia made a little grimace. The Infant had already risen from his chair.

"Those new tunes would sound simply rippin' out here," he said. "Ba George! you know, it's quite surprising how sound carries across the water."

"You wouldn't like to take it out in the punt with you?" suggested Pia faintly.

"Oh, no," answered Lady Betty, "we're so comfy and peaceful here."

"Peaceful!" exclaimed Pia in a quick ironic aside to Hawe. Then she turned to the Infant—"Do bring the gramophone out by all means."

After he had disappeared into the house, she said, as though struck with a sudden idea—"I say, Toby, shall *we* take the punt out: what do you think?"

He jumped at the proposition.

They strolled down to the landing-stage.

"By the way," said Hawe, "won't you want a cloak—some sort of a wrap, anyway?"

She was wearing a black evening-dress, which left her neck and arms bare.

"Oh, no," she returned, "I'm all right."



"Let me go and get you a shawl."

She laughed. "Women don't wear shawls, these days."

"Well, then, a boa or something. You'll catch cold, as you are."

"Shall I?" She screwed up her eyes, with her favourite little grimace.

"You're a thoughtful creature, Toby . . . All right, then—there's my old covert coat hanging up in the hall, if you don't mind fetching it. And bring a box of cigarettes, too."

When he returned she had stepped into the boat, and was arranging a pile of red and blue cushions for her own comfort.

"Which way shall we go?" he asked a few minutes later. He had pushed the punt away from the bank, and stood opposite her, bareheaded, the pole in his hands, the sleeves of his dinner-jacket turned back, a cigarette between his lips.

She was smoking too.

"Which way did Peter go?" she questioned deliberately.

"Down stream."

"Then we'll go up."

When he had turned the boat and they were rippling through the water—

"I don't want to clash with Peter, after refusing to go out with him," she said.

Hawe laughed, because he did not understand her.

"Of course not," he said nonchalantly.

"Poor old Peter!" repeated Pia softly, with her head against the cushions and her eyes fixed on the sky. The man had enough perception to guess that she intended to arouse his curiosity. He assumed an inquisitiveness that he was not sufficiently interested to feel.

"Why poor?"

"Oh, I don't know. He's so silly—I'm just sorry for him."

There was a pause. The punt pole slithered through Hawe's hands, and he pushed it vigorously to the bottom.

"By the way, who is he?" he said at last.

"Who—Peter?"

"Yes. What's his proper name?"

"Why, there's nothing improper in the one by which we already call him!"

"Of course not, but I suppose he has another—just as I am not universally known as 'Toby.'"

"Oh! Peter was christened 'Peter,'" she answered meditatively; "and didn't you know?—he's engaged to Lady Betty."

"No—really?"

"He's Mr. Wyngate, but no one ever calls him that. He's known as Mr. Betty—or just Peter!"

Hawe laughed.

"What amuses you?" she said.

"I think—the idea of a man being called after his future wife."

"Yes, I suppose it is rather funny. What do you think of her? Pretty, isn't she?"

"No," said Hawe; "she has only got nice hair."

"And not a bad figure. I believe she's really my best woman friend; at least, we occasionally do each other good turns openly, and in secret we only take away each other's characters when absolutely necessary."

Hawe laughed again. "Is that your definition of feminine friendship?"

"Oh, no," returned Pia. "It isn't possible to define the non-existent, is it? A relation in which each individual is equally the well-wisher of the other is impossible between women."

"You're down on your sex."

"I'm not. I believe we are all egoists. As such, there can be no real intimacy between us. It isn't our fault. Women are essentially individual. We weren't intended for reciprocation."

"Oh, I don't know," said Hawe meditatively. "How about when you're in love?"

Pia gave a short little laugh. "You can't think that even then there's ever a mutual giving and receiving?" "It seems odd, but it's awfully true." She paused—then continued in a curious tone—"I've often wondered,

why can't women, even when they want love, intensely, passionately—when they feel mad with the desire for devotion" (her voice quivered slightly), "why can't they approach and take any affection that's offered? It's as though one were frozen with cold, and one saw before one a beautiful red fire—all glowing and comforting—and it were impossible to approach, because the way was barred; and it's as though, even while one longed to get nearer, a voice whispered—'It would be no use. For you there is no warmth in the fire'?"

Hawe drew the punt-pole out of the water, and sitting down opposite the woman, took one of the paddles and dipped it in the stream. His eyes were fixed intently on Pia's face, which showed white in the dark.

"What are you talking about?" he said at last. "I don't catch on."

She leaned forward, as though in excitement.

"You don't understand? Then I'll tell you. It's Peter—d'you see. He's the fire. What do you think of the simile? Yes, I know I'm talking nonsense; but he says he cares—goes on saying so. He's madly in love with me and all that. He explains exactly what he feels once a fortnight." She caught her breath in an hysterical little laugh, then continued quickly, "But—what am I to do? I like him about as much as I'd like a dead cat! Sort of 'Poor thing' feeling, don't you know. And it's simply wretched."

She gave Hawe a little whimsical, half-pathetic smile. He could not understand whether or no she were in earnest. He drew the paddle on to his knee. The punt drifted slowly back down stream.

"Poor old Pia!" he said presently, and added after a moment, more seriously, "It's rather rough luck on the fire too, isn't it?"

"On Peter?" she said. "Oh! well, after all, it gives him something to think about. You know, it must be rather interesting to feel you're being consumed by the intensity of your own emotions. . . . Isn't everything grotesque, anyway?" She laughed again. "Toby, pass me the cigarettes, please."

CHAPTER XIII.

HE struck a match, and, leaning forward, held it in the hollow of his hands that she might light her cigarette.

Their fingers touched.

"Why, how cold you are!" he said, and laid his own hand quite naturally over one of her wrists.

"And you—how warm you are!" she said vaguely.

Almost as though she were unconscious of her own action, she suddenly took his hand in both of hers, and sat looking at it. Hawe, for a moment, let it remain passively in her grasp, and dropped the yet flaming match into the stream. As it was extinguished, there was the sound of a kiss between fire and water. The man gave a little laugh, and withdrew his fingers.

"You really are awfully chilled," he said practically. "Hadn't we better go in?"

"No," she answered. "Oh, no, let's stay out a little longer. D'you mind? And—hark! I'm sure I hear the gramophone. Betty and the Infant are still at it."

They both listened. The faint, wheezy strains of one of Sousa's marches reached their ears. Pia made a grimace.

"How can they sit and play with that thing, on such a night?" she said.

The tint of the sky had deepened to the colour of a blue pansy. Against its velvet softness, the white stars stood out like drops of dew on the petals of a flower.

"Look!" said Pia, pointing over the trees, "a little moon!"

The earth's satellite showed only a slim crescent, cut across by a tiny cloud, like a feather. Beneath them, the water whispered secrets to their boat.

"Oh, no," repeated the woman softly. "Don't let's go in yet. It can't be very late. Let's get away

from the sound of those rag-time tunes, further down the river."

"You'll catch an awful cold," said Hawe.

"You Philistine! to suggest such a thing, when I'm feeling poetical. No, see here; I'll take the other paddle and do some of the hard work. That'll keep me warm. Hand the thing over, Toby, please. There, now come and sit by me; there's heaps of room."

She made a place beside her on the cushions.

"Don't exert yourself," he said comfortably, as he seated himself and leant back with a paddle still resting on his knees.

"You needn't," she said, and began to propel the boat with swift, firm strokes. They glided quickly down stream.

"Say, Pia," began the man diffidently, after a few moments' silence.

"Yes."

"What's all that you were saying just now—about that chap?"

"Who?"

"What's-his-name—you know—Wyngate."

"Well?"

"Were you joking?"

"When?"

"Oh, you know quite well what I mean. Is he—is he—really gone on you?"

"Why shouldn't he be?" she murmured, and stayed to puff at her cigarette.

Hawe regarded her steadily.

"Our conversation is gradually becoming a mere interchange of unanswered questions," he said abruptly.

"I think mine came first."

She gave a little shriek of laughter.

"My dear Toby—I don't exist solely for the pleasure of giving you information."

"I beg your pardon," he said quickly, and seemed to stiffen visibly.

She turned, and looked at him with screwed-up eyes.

"Are you cross?" she said amusedly.

"Not in the least."

"Oh! I thought you were. Now, what do you want to know?"

"Thanks. I'm not at all curious."

"Oh, you horror!" she returned sharply, laughing, as though at a joke. "Don't for mercy's sake be superior."

Hawe folded his arms passively.

"I suppose," he said, with nonchalance, "that if you want to, you will turn the boat and take her in—or would you like me to do it?"

She did not answer, but kept the punt on its way. Then presently, "Why shouldn't Peter like me?" she said, without looking at her companion.

Hawe puffed a cloud of smoke from his mouth.

"I see no reason at all," he said carelessly, "only——"

He stopped.

"Only—what?"

"Well," he answered slowly, "I don't see why you should have told me about it."

"Oh!" she exclaimed, and stared straight ahead. After a moment, "Do you suggest that it was mean of me—to—give him away?" she asked.

"Yes," he returned, on the impulse; then added hastily, "Forgive me—I've awful cheek."

She laughed again. "I don't mind," she said. "You're really quite right. Peter may be a fool, poor thing, but I'd no business to tell you so. I think it's queer how men will stand up for one another. Women never get championed like that. All the same, the funny part of it is, that I intended to make quite a different impression."

He remained silent, but eyed her curiously.

"I meant," she continued, with a touch of bravado, "to make you jealous. Did you ever hear of anything so absurd?"

He was thoroughly taken aback. His fingers, holding the lighted cigarette, and raised half-way to his mouth, dropped involuntarily against her dress. He stared at

her in sheer bewilderment. She met his gaze with a little ironic smile quivering on her lips. Then she looked down at her gown, and snatched at the material.

"My dear man, you're setting me on fire! See—you've gone and burnt a big hole! Pouf! how it smells!"

She lifted a fold of the stuff, and held it towards his face. Her shoulders suddenly began to shake with mirth.

"Oh, I say!" he said, bending forward to cover his confusion. "I say—I am sorry! How abominably careless of me!"

He gave her a quick glance, with wrinkled brows, and questioning, penitent eyes. "I seem to be putting my foot in it, all round, to night," he added.

"Your foot—or your hand," she answered lightly, and plucked at her dress. "Well—it can't be helped. You're only a great clumsy boy!"

"Indeed, I'm sorry," he said seriously, and touched her arm with tentative fingers.

"How funny you are!" she said. "I don't think I've ever before met anyone quite so simple. D'you remember a conversation we had one day about having both grown up, since last we met one another?"

"Why, yes," he answered. "We agreed that we were each older and infinitely wiser, for ten years' experience."

"After all," she said slowly, "I believe that I alone have aged. You've remained a child. How have you managed it, Toby?"

"We've lived such different lives," he said hesitatingly. "That must show, mustn't it? I mean—the conditions that have influenced me have been nearly all along, essentially primitive—call them, if you will, simple, though that's too good a word. Don't you see, I've known things in the raw—I've fought to exist—not to be happy merely, or successful, but just to earn money, for bread. So you come down to facts. Then,

I think, Nature, one's surroundings, don't you know, make an impression."

He stopped abruptly.

"Yes," she said, "yes——"

After a moment: "Oh, one can't talk about it," he said, and paused again to flick the ash from his cigarette into the water. She waited for him to speak, but as he remained silent, herself took up the thread of the conversation.

"I expect you're right. D'you know, I almost wish we hadn't ever come across each other again. There's such a contrast. You, probably, consider me shallow. I think you, if anything, too honest."

"That's unnecessary," he interposed drily. "I'm afraid I've not troubled much about living straight."

"Silly!" she said; "I don't care about what you've *done*. I have a distinct recollection of your telling me you had an awful past when you were twenty-five. It's what you *are*. My life has conduced to prevarication, and so I allow myself to drift—just as we're drifting now, in this boat." She was silent for a moment, then added: "After all, it's the only sensible attitude. I believe that, in whatever phase of life, human beings are no more than twigs or leaves or weeds, whirled on and on by the current. Some of us are larger and offer more resistance to the force of the stream; then we talk about will-power, as though it counted!"

"Oh, you're wrong," said Hawe, quickly. "Strength of will *does* count. It's the only metaphysical force existing. You spoke of a current. What's that but the projected will-power of former generations?"

"The current?" repeated Pia thoughtfully; "why, the current is circumstance."

"Man made circumstance," continued Hawe, incisively. "Go back to the beginning. For the sake of argument, say that one created man had an intelligence more highly developed than his kind—perhaps not so much an intelligence as the power to influence and lead: the germ of an indefinable magnetism: the first faint stirring of a quality Napoleonic."

"Yes?" she murmured.

"Well," continued Hawe, leaning forward and speaking in a low, enthusiastic voice, "this leader of his kind, by introducing new conditions, created circumstance—and died. D'you believe that the inner power that had raised him, given him more importance than the others—the undeniably existing force which, for want of a better word, we call 'will,' d'you believe that life went out of *that*, as well as out of the body?"

"I'm sure I don't know," she said, with a faint tremor of suppressed laughter.

"Neither do I," he said; "but I think. Here's my idea. You know how parsons will tell you about your immortal soul, the life to come, and so on. All that was rubbed into me when I was a little boy. I believed that I had, as it were, a spiritual familiar, an impalpable Being always near me, yet never quite of me: a wonderful, ghost-like and angelic Soul. I imagined it as a very beautiful but feeble personality, whom I must protect. That argued that I myself, the ego within me, must be stronger than the Soul. I realised this, and was puzzled at the representation that importance centred in the weaker being. You see, I was taught that if I stole the jam or kicked my nurse, these sins would, in some incomprehensible manner, show as dark stains on the exquisite purity of the garments worn by the Soul. It was never explained to me how I was to combat such impulses." Hawe paused to puff at his cigarette. "Only," he added, "of course the bribery and corruption of a future Heaven or Hell came into the argument."

"All children suffer from that," said Pia. "I remember having nightmares about a flaming bottomless pit, when I was young. Wasn't it wicked! Were you ever frightened?"

"No," said Hawe, whimsically. "I was a good little boy."

They both laughed.

"Well, anyway, what's your present creed?" she asked.

"Oh, we aren't talking of creeds," he answered quickly, betraying an instant reserve.

"Your idea, then—what you were going to tell me? I'm interested."

"Are you?"

"Go on. What a baffling creature you are! Now you're grown up—no, now you're big, don't you believe in the Soul?"

"I really don't know," he said slowly; then continued in his former argumentative tone, "I think it is necessary to every man to hold that some inner, spiritual part of him lasts beyond physical death. In all of us there is bound to be so much egoism. Now, to me, the most rational idea seems that will alone should go on. D'you see what I mean? I am convinced that a man's life is in his will-power, and that he is immortally strong according to the force of his influence."

"But supposing he should exert it to a bad end?"

"I don't care," said Hawe doggedly. "The argument may be immoral, but to me it seems clear that a man who has strength of mind and purpose, even though he misuse it, is worth more than one who is weak and a saint. Personally, I would rather be a blackguard with will-power (for the possession of that necessitates as well self-control) than an honest man without mental vigour."

"Then, where does example come in?"

"It doesn't—or rather it should not. A personal precedent is shown for the guidance of children for as long as they shall be at an imitative age. Men and women can take Nature as a model. The natural law is that "Might is Right"—whence comes the survival of the fittest. I think if ever I had children, I would have them brought up on that principle."

"My dear Toby, they would be unbearable."

"No, they wouldn't, because I should inculcate self-control first. They should learn the value of will-power. So many of us don't, till late in life. Then it comes hard. My children should be made to realise the necessity of mental strength and concentration, and

taught that such power, generated within them, is immortal."

"But I don't see—well, anyway, think how they would fight. Each child would try to influence the others. They would probably end by killing each other. Say the eldest was the most highly developed (which is quite conceivable), and that on the principle of might being right, he first insisted on domineering over his strong-minded brothers and sisters, and finally, in sheer desperation, murdered them. Just imagine—what would you do?"

Pia's voice shook with laughter. Hawe hesitated momentarily. Then—"Perhaps it would simplify matters to have only one child," he said gravely.

"Oh!" said Pia with an irrepressible chuckle, "you are too splendid! And I suppose you wouldn't allow your wretched wife a say in the educational process?"

The man was silent. His thoughts had flown to Maisie Courtfield. After a long pause, "I don't believe," he said, "that she would really be very interested."

Pia looked at him questioningly.

"Is there, then, at present a particular possible *she*," she asked at last, in an odd tone.

"What d'you mean?" he asked with a little nervous laugh.

"Are you in love, Toby?"

Hawe laughed again, "Why? Do I show any symptoms?"

"We're returning to our unanswered questions," she said, with a shrug of her shoulders.

"I'm sorry," he answered.

There was another little silence, and he smiled with foolish tenderness—a little secretive smile in the darkness.

"No," he said, at last, conscious of the lie, "no—I don't think I'm in love. Of course not—what an idea!"

In his mind was the wish to conceal, from even the most sympathetic observer, his presence as he stood in the doorway of a sacred Temple, on the threshold of a great self-revelation. Within the Temple was the

shrine of Love, beyond the shrine a Holy of Holies, which he hoped to reach. He approached the place with awe. None might pry into his feelings. As he denied his state, Pia caught her breath in a little sigh, then persisted softly—

"Have you ever cared much about any woman—all these years, Toby?"

"No," he returned truthfully, "I don't think I have."

She gave a glad low laugh. "You wonderful man!" she said. "Thirty-five and heart-whole!" After a moment, she added, "By the way, dear, what's the time?"

It was the first time she had ever addressed him by a term of affection. Now, the word slipped so naturally from her lips that it passed unnoticed. Hawe struck a match and consulted his watch.

"By Jove!" he exclaimed, "it's half-past ten."

"How the time's flown!" she answered. "Well, I suppose we ought to turn back. What a lot of things we have talked about."

Hawe was propelling the punt now, paddling back up stream, with vigorous strokes.

"Yes, indeed," he returned. "What a queer conversation we've had! Fancy metaphysics on the river. However did we start?"

"On a widely different subject—a discussion of Peter."

"Peter?" repeated Hawe. "Oh, yes. Good gracious! You were telling me——"

"Never mind," she answered laughing, "please forget all that."

"But I was going to ask you—say, Pia, are you heart-whole too—I mean—it's all right—you don't care about the chap, do you?"

"Silly!" she said softly. "Didn't I tell you? He's no more to me than a dead cat! . . . Only, don't you see, life's so boring for both of us. It keeps his mind occupied—to think he likes me, in a way. He's just a useful hanger-on."

"But," said Hawe, slowly, "is the game worth the candle? Forgive me, won't you, old girl?"

He laid his hand once more over hers, with cool affection. "Don't think me a beastly prig, Pia—or impertinent, but—well—you know what I mean? There's Lady Betty. Aren't you sailing just a bit near the wind?"

He stopped paddling to wait for her reply. She smiled in his face. "Thank you, Toby," she said, "but it's quite safe. I'm all right. And Betty's absolutely happy, playing round with little boys. She knows all about Peter and me, but she refuses to break off the engagement. It is to be a marriage of convenience. Actually, she and I sometimes discuss his infatuation. So you see, it's quite above-board, and it's only the way we live—in our set. . . . Yes, I have occasionally thought it rather a queer existence, but one can't put oneself on a pedestal, don't you know. And—anyway—you're a good sort, Toby."

She gave his hand a little squeeze, then laughed, as though at a joke.

When they reached the garden landing-stage, they found the lawn deserted.

"The others will have gone back into the drawing-room," said Pia. "I expect they're playing dummy bridge."

Hawe helped her from the boat, and having secured the punt to a ring on the little wooden platform, turned to stroll, by the woman's side, towards the house.

"By the way," he said, "I hope you aren't still cold? Just now, you know, you were shivering. I hope you won't have caught a chill."

"No," she answered brightly; "oh, no, thanks, I'm not a bit cold now." Then her voice took on a softer intonation. "I was freezing—chilled to the bone—perished; but now I'm warm! . . . Oh! how glorious it is to be warm! I can feel the glow of the fire—at last—at last!" The words ended in a whisper. Hawe caught merely the reference to a "fire."

"Why," he said simply, taking the literal meaning, "you surely won't have one burning indoors on a summer night like this, will you?"

CHAPTER XIV.

DURING the week that followed his visit to Maidenhead, Hawe felt himself on more than one occasion baffled in trying to fathom the cause of an alteration in Pia's manner. He arrived no nearer an understanding than in evolving the idea that she appeared to be waiting, in a state of suspense, for some event to take place, or some word to be spoken. Sometimes, when in her presence, it was as though he could hear the excited beating of her heart. At moments, in their conversation, he could imagine that she held her breath, and remained tense with expectancy. He told himself, "Perhaps she isn't well. This restless social existence is telling on her nerves." He remarked a habit she had developed of flushing suddenly crimson beneath his gaze, or of growing white to the lips. She seemed to lose gradually some of her cynical nonchalance of manner.

One day, as they sat together in the Park, and watched the passing multitude, their conversation turned on the use of cosmetics. Pia's face was powdered and rouged, not thickly, so as to appear vulgar. The thickly spotted veil she wore softened the effect, so that, even at close quarters, she gave the impression of having a naturally good complexion. Hawe, indeed, seated by her side, thought that she looked unusually well.

"There's a pretty girl," she said suddenly: "the one in blue—holding a parasol—d'you see?"

"Ye-es," he returned doubtfully, and added, "I know her quite well by sight now. She haunts the Park most afternoons, nearly always with a different man."

"That's explainable. They say she's got pots of money. I believe Betty knows her. The people boiled soap, or something. But she's pretty enough for that not to matter."

Opposite their seats, the girl in blue had stopped to greet some friends. The group blocked up the whole width of the pathway, with that supreme disregard for the convenience of other pedestrians, which marks a well-dressed crowd. Hawe regarded the people quizzically—his head a little on one side.

"No," he said presently, "that isn't a pretty girl. She hasn't a single perfect feature, and she's horribly made-up."

Pia laughed. "You're too critical, Toby. And as to cosmetics, why, the use of those is as common and necessary, nowadays, as the use of soap and water was to our grandmothers. Every decent up-to-date woman rouges or powders according to her need. Good gracious! one would feel quite undressed, if one went out with nothing on one's face."

"I'm afraid you'll find me hard to convince," returned Hawe. "I hate to think of any woman painting her skin."

"You speak as though we were savages."

"So you are. I don't see the difference. The natives of New Zealand—the Maoris—daub their faces across with white stripes. I've seen photographs of them."

"My dear Toby, you must allow that our make-up is rather more becoming."

"Oh, I daresay, but essentially it's the same: a nasty, dirty mess. Fancy a fellow falling in love with a woman who painted her face! Why, every time after he kissed her, he'd have to go and wash."

Pia for a moment seemed to sit rigidly still. Then she leant back in her chair with a faint smile.

"You put things vulgarly," she said, "but you're amusing too. How thoroughly a man you are, in your prejudices, as in everything else. The type's rare nowadays. It's years since I've met anyone who talked about a woman '*painting*' her face." Then, after a pause—"You're right; the term doesn't sound quite civilised. To me, you know, it fails to give the right impression."

"Why?" said Hawe.

"Well, it sounds as though you imagined we sat down with brushes, and a box of artist's colours, and used our skins as canvas."

"I'm sure I don't know how the stuff's applied," said Hawe. "But that is hardly the point. What beats me is, how any woman can imagine that 'make-up' improves her appearance."

Pia made her favourite grimace.

"Well, I use rouge and powder and all the other things," she said defiantly, "and my looking-glass tells me that the deception is justifiable."

Hawe remained silent.

"You are very rude," she continued with an aggravated little laugh. "Am I to presume that you disagree with my mirror?"

He turned and looked at her critically. After a moment, "Yes," he answered.

She flushed quickly.

"Oh!" she exclaimed, with a trace of irritation, "your ideas are out-of-date."

"That I can't help," he replied.

"But, Toby, do you really mean to say that you think I would look nicer with a shiny nose and no colour in my cheeks?"

"You exaggerate," he said laughing.

"I don't," she interposed. "I know what you're going to say—something too trite about the advantages of a natural appearance. Really, you know nothing about it. I must make you understand. My real complexion is too vile for words. I'm sallow and without colour, my face looks twice as thin—like a death's-head. Indeed, if I didn't make-up I should be positively frightful."

"I'm afraid I don't believe you," he answered.

She laughed and leant towards him.

"Then you shall judge for yourself. Come to tea to-morrow, and you shall see me as I am. There's honesty for you!"

"I shall be delighted," he said.

"Your delight won't last long. I intend to convert you, even though the conversion entails self-sacrifice."

He went, and found her awaiting him in her cool, flower-scented drawing-room. She wore a deep cream-coloured dress, of a very soft and clinging material. At her throat and wrists, there was a quantity of exquisite age-tinted lace, and in the front of her bodice a bunch of Malmaison carnations. Her hair was arranged less elaborately than usual. Her face was colourless. The line of her lips was no longer outlined with artificial red, and in consequence her mouth appeared to have gained in size and mobility. Attention was drawn to her wonderful grey-green eyes, beneath the naturally dark eyebrows. Hawe took her hand and regarded her approvingly.

"Well?" she said sharply.

"How awfully nice you look!" he answered.

She laughed, and a faint, youthful flush came into her cheeks. She stood before him, almost shyly, like a girl.

"Then you aren't convinced, Toby?" she said, and fidgeted with the carnations in the front of her gown.

"Of what are you anxious to convince me?"

"Of my ugliness," she returned, and looked at him searchingly.

"Oh, no," he answered quickly, "you're not ugly." Yet, as he spoke the words, he knew that she lacked beauty.

She laughed again nervously.

"I suppose I ought to be pleased. Personally I think I'm hideous. I told you I should look like a death's-head.

"You don't," he said. "I like you pale."

"Do you? You're very kind."

"You're not a bit sallow," he said. "You look delicate. I don't believe you are particularly strong, are you?"

"Oh, I don't know—Well, perhaps not. But anyway, do you mean to say you prefer me all washed-out like this, to when I was made-up?"

"Yes, by Jove, I do," he returned. "At present you're *you*—the real woman. Yesterday you were a painted doll. All along I felt that you had no individuality, that you were artificial right through. Now there's the same difference, as that existing between these flowers"—he touched her carnations tentatively—"and the ones that are made out of calico, and tinted to simulate Nature."

"I believe," she said, "that you're paying me compliments. Yet there's a crude honesty about the way you put them. And as to convincing you, I really think you're quite the most pig-headed creature I ever met. If I never use rouge I shall have to give up wearing black; it's impossible with a bad complexion, and I hate white or colours; but still——"

On the occasion of their next meeting, he noticed that her skin was pale and that she wore a neutrally-tinted dress. Her appearance was no longer markedly attractive, and he felt unaccountably disappointed. Only in conversation, or when her face was lighted by a glow of heat or excitement, did he realise that she had retained an indefinable charm.

Now, whenever they met, her face bore no trace of the use of cosmetics. Lady Betty Hoskins, with whom Hawe had become slightly acquainted, remarked to him on the change in her friend.

"What's been the matter with Pia lately?" she said in her lazy tones. "Haven't you noticed—she's been looking wretched, and quite plain."

"Has she?" said he stiffly. "No; I haven't seen it."

"All men are unobservant," she continued airily. "Pia used to make up a little—quite harmlessly, don't you know. I'd be the last to blame her. Poor darlin', she hasn't got a naturally good skin. Now she hasn't rouged for the past week. I can't imagine why. Are you, by any chance, responsible for her sudden blindness as regards her own personal appearance?"

"I?" said Hawe. "What on earth have I to do with it?"

"Don't ask me," she said, and laughed. "Only I'm

sure you're just the sort of person to disapprove of a poor woman powderin' her nose. You're colonial, aren't you? All colonials are *farouche*. You don't mind my saying so, do you? I adore *farouche* people. They are so novel, don't you think? I once knew a man who came from New Guinea. He ate peas with a knife. We used to give luncheon parties, and ask people to see how he did it. . . . What was I saying? Oh, yes, about Pia. You'd better take care. When a woman sacrifices her appearance to please one particular man. . . . And, you know, I never *could* understand how he managed not to cut himself."

Lady Betty's suggestion brought to Hawe's mind a half-formulated and altogether horrid idea to explain the alteration in Pia Hamlyn. The momentary suspicion was so disconcerting, that, almost immediately, he put it away from him, with the refusal to regard or entertain it. He indulged thereafter in some self-accusation on the matter of unwarrantable conceit, reminded himself that Pia had always appeared one of the least sentimental of women, and remained in perplexing uncertainty as to the true cause of the difference in her manner. In the meanwhile, his interests were fully occupied by more pleasing considerations. His thoughts were constantly with Maisie Courtfield, and in person he gradually became as well a more and more frequent visitor at the flat in Rosemore Mansions. He readily accepted a casual invitation proffered by Cecilia, to come to mid-day dinner on any Sunday, and, after a while, his weekly presence at this particular meal became habitual. He endured the unvarying, recurring routine of roast beef, cabbage and boiled potatoes, of plum tart and custard, and of soap-like cheese, with delight, because it was participated in by the lady of his affections. Love is a great appetiser. "Better a dinner of herbs and love withal, than a stalled ox." In Hawe's case, the stalled ox was comprised. He was a man of simple tastes, and would have preferred the herbs. Also, it seemed to him that the idea of vegetarianism is more subtly in accord with the

emotions than the aroma of cooked meat. He recognised, however, the necessity to conform to a matter-of-fact attitude, and even wondered at the evolution within himself of poetical instincts. He assigned the development to the influence of passion, and became interested in his own condition. There were moments when he considered the attraction as a kind of mania, and in forming this opinion, realised a lucid interval. Like a searchlight, the question would illumine his mind, as to whether any true intellectual sympathy existed between himself and the girl? He knew that a negative answer existed, hidden in his brain, but chose to cheat himself to a disbelief in the presence of any obstacle. He allowed himself to lapse into impracticabilities of thought, and even brought them into discussion with Maisie, who excelled in giving her opinions on the emotional side of Nature.

June gave place to July. London grew insufferably hot, yet the fashionable world remained untiring in bringing to bear on the pursuit of amusement an energy sufficiently whole-hearted to deserve a worthier aim. With clock-work regularity, at stated hours, tired women and bored men thronged the Park. Hawe himself loitered with the rest. It was at first amusing. As, with repetition, loafing lost its novelty, he no longer found fascination in the parade, or interest in the crowd. From an ignorance of up-to-date *ennui*, he fell to a suspicion of its nature. He began to realise a vague weariness of the social routine. It was at this period that Maisie Courtfield one day informed him that she and Cecilia had thoughts of leaving town on their annual holiday. The elder sister was permitted a six weeks' respite in the year from typewriting.

"We think of going to Brittany," said the girl. "Our friend Dr. Brassy (you remember him?) has told us of a charming place called St. Servan. It is near St. Malo. You go there by steamer from Southampton, then there is a tram to St. Servan. We are going to stay in a *pension*. . . . I *am* so excited and pleased about it. Just think, I am going abroad at last!"

Hawe was dismayed. He had neglected to make any plans for the summer, and disliked the thought of spending it apart from the Courtfields. He told the girl as much, with characteristic frankness.

"Well," said Maisie, laughing, "why don't you come too? There's nothing to prevent you. If you like, Cecilia shall even engage a room ahead for you, when she is writing about ours. I believe the place is crammed in August."

CHAPTER XV.

"WHEN the time comes to escape, will you get someone to catch a cab for me, please, Toby?"

"Of course. Didn't you motor down?"

"No—the thing's being repaired. That's the worst of motors."

"Then may I see you home?"

"Certainly."

On the lawn at Hurlingham, after dinner, a gay crowd was assembled. Chairs were grouped in front of a three-sided tent, which did duty as a covered bandstand for half-a-dozen Viennese musicians, who wore frock coats and tall hats. They rendered the simplest little pieces with fine sentimental effect; and finally struck up the "Valse Amoureuse." The familiar strains throbbed with a passionate fervour through the evening air. The violins took up the *motif*, and sang of love, with an intensity of emotion that Hawe, as he sat listening, felt to be irresistible in its prompting towards a romantic mood. An easy digestion of the good dinner he had eaten, combined with the influence of a somewhat heady champagne, were two causes that, even more than the music, may have been responsible for this result.

The lady who gave the dinner-party, at which he and Pia Hamlyn had been entertained, was an acquaintance of them both. She was blessed with a comfortable income, and a faculty for playing the part of hostess to the largest number of people, with the least expenditure of trouble.

"Money," she had been heard to say, "is no object, but energy I will not waste."

Her guests were seldom amused. Hawe, at the long table within the club dining-room, had found himself

seated next to a young lady from a cathedral town. She told him that she had come up to London for the season, talked very fast and lengthily, and repeated several clerical anecdotes of a somewhat heavy nature.

On his left-hand side, sat a plain woman whose interest centred in slumming and socialistic questions. The amount of knowledge she possessed, with regard to these two subjects, proved quite overwhelming. Hawe, momentarily interested, soon became bewildered by statistics. He glanced across the table at Pia, who sat between a coffee-coloured young man of palpably foreign extraction and royal blood, and a bishop of benign aspect. Sidney remarked enviously that Pia appeared well amused. He was aware, too, that in herself she was an entertaining companion, and wished that, at the moment, they could be nearer neighbours. He watched her, and came to the conclusion that the occasion showed her at her best. She was becomingly gowned in grey, and wore a large black hat, but in the play of the woman's features lay her fascination—in the cynical screwing up of her eyes, the half-satirical smile of her lips.

Directly after dinner, Hawe drifted to her side. The party adjourned to the grounds and sat listening to the Viennese musicians. Hawe fancied that some sympathy with his mood existed in Mrs. Hamlyn. As they talked, her voice grew soft and languorous, her conversation was daringly quizzical; she laughed a good deal, quite gently, showing her little white teeth. At the same time, she appeared to be consumed by a certain restlessness, and her speech, though amusing, was vaguer than usual. The darkness was softly illuminated by a number of Chinese lanterns, strung on wires, from tree to tree. In the distance, the lights on the river were visible. A faint, cool breeze arose and stirred the oppressive air. And on and on sounded the sugar-sweet strains of "Amoureuse." Pia ceased talking to Hawe, tilted her chair, swung her foot, and hummed the air. He leant forward to make some remark, and suddenly noted the expression of her face. In its unqualified enjoyment of the present,

it was almost voluptuous. Her narrow eyes were nearly closed, her lips were parted in a smile of perfect sensual satisfaction. The woman appeared like a personification of the music.

Presently Hawe realised that the bishop and his wife were taking leave of their hostess.

"We are going by train. Yes, so much more convenient and safer, don't you think? Many thanks—a charming evening—good-night. Good-night!"

Other members of the party rose to follow this example.

In a little while, Hawe and Pia were standing on the steps of the club, jostled by a crowd of other departing guests and members, all intent on the purpose of finding their respective vehicles. Sidney had dispatched a "runner" in search of a cab. Presently a hansom clattered to the kerb. As Mrs. Hamlyn put her foot on the step, he noted that she glanced back over her shoulder, nodded carelessly to an acquaintance in the background, and said "Good-night!" in her most non-chalant tone. He looked in the direction her view had taken, and observed a tall, dark-moustached man, who stood, hat in hand, regarding them. Hawe was struck by the expression of utter weariness and hopeless boredom in the face of Pia's acquaintance. The features and aspect of the man seemed to him, also, somewhat familiar. He followed Pia into the cab, and they drove away.

"Don't shut the apron," she said. "It's cooler to have it open."

"Right," he agreed, "and thanks. I can stretch my legs. D'you mind if I smoke?"

"Not a bit."

"Will you join me?"

"No, thanks, not till I get home."

He lighted a cigarette, then, as he puffed at it, asked, "Say, Pia, who was the chap you bowed to? It seemed I knew him, but I couldn't recall the name."

"It was Peter," she answered, in rather an odd tone.

"Peter?" he repeated, at a loss.

"Yes; surely you remember—Mr. Betty—down at Maidenhead."

"By Jove!" said Hawe. "Of course."

His mind was flooded by recollections.

"I don't think I've met him since then," he added, after a moment.

"Really?" said Pia, and laughed. "Well, one doesn't often see him with his *fiancée*."

"What d'you mean?" said Hawe. "I hardly ever come across her either, except at your house."

"My dear Toby, did you think I imagined you were running after Betty? I'm not a fool in that direction, anyway. Only it's quite true. Peter and she don't get on; their marriage, if it ever comes off, will be purely one of convenience. I know they see as little of each other as possible, even now. She doesn't mind; she's always got a hundred and one *attachés*, all very young and callow. (Does that sound jealous?) Yet I sometimes feel glad that I am not the mother of a nineteen-year old son, who would be likely to fall into her clutches."

Hawe nodded, waited for some moments, and then said, "And what about Peter?"

"Oh, I suppose he manages to amuse himself. Men generally do."

There was reserve in her tone.

"His expression didn't give one the idea that he's had much success," said Hawe curiously.

"Well," she returned evenly, "you needn't be a brute and rub it in."

"What d'you mean?" he repeated.

"Nothing—no—a lot! Oh! Toby, d'you know—I'm trying to be a reformed character, and I hate it."

She laughed again rather hysterically.

"Whatever for?" said he in amazement.

"Eh?"

"Why are you trying to be a reformed character?"

"Oh! I don't know. There was something you said—d'you remember—about sailing rather near the

wind? And so—well, I administered a course of snubbing, and was purposely horrid to him—out when he called and so on. . . . It sounds easy, but it wasn't particularly. Not that I cared (have you grasped that yet?) but—don't you know—it seemed so wretched and caddish, to suddenly turn prig, when the poor thing was quite harmless, and remained happy, just as long as he might tell me his symptoms every now and again."

"Then—you've dropped him?" said Hawe, in bewilderment. "But I don't see——"

"Oh, never mind," she interposed, and for a moment stared straight ahead, without speaking.

They were driving through the ill-lighted streets in the environs of Hurlingham.

"A woman never has a reason for behaving as I have done," she continued presently, in a tone half-cynical, half-tired. "It is one of our privileges that we may act on impulse, and remain irresponsible."

Hawe regarded her. "I never quite know how much of what you say you mean," he observed. "I wish you'd explain. Have you taken a dislike to him?"

"To Peter? Dear me, no. After having been quite indifferent to a person, one very seldom conceives a sudden hatred for them, do you think? He hadn't even bored me more than usual. . . . Surely, you don't want any more explanations. You yourself suggested that it wasn't the straight thing to have someone else's belonging as a hanger-on. I've been trying to start some principles!"

She turned and made her favourite little grimace at him.

"By Jove!" said Hawe. "You *are* surprising!"

They both laughed.

"Why are you laughing?" she asked, suddenly grave.

"At your way of putting it—at the suggestion that you should have acted on my advice. I hope you haven't, Pia. I should feel awfully guilty."

"Bless the man, what an idea!" she returned lightly. "Please allow me some judgment of my own. As a matter of fact, I'm making an experiment. I don't

know yet whether it will turn out to my own satisfaction. What do you think? Does it pay, in the long run, to have rules of right and wrong?"

"Don't ask me," he replied, laughing. "I'm no authority."

"But you must have some opinion."

"What's the idea?" he said lightly. "Have you suddenly been smitten with a desire to live up to your name?"

"That's it," she answered, and once more screwed up her eyes at him. Then she continued, ironically, "I must say, you're chary of encouragement! Don't you see—the newest thing is a cult of the strictest morality. I read a book the other day, expecting something smart, for the author's name is connected with quite the wickedest and most delightful type of novel. Instead of a social satire, it proved to be a religious dissertation. Imagine the sell! It was like having a volume of Methodist sermons palmed off on one as an amusing and highly-flavoured romance. A sheep in wolf's clothing—Ellen Thorneycroft Fowler under the pseudonym of—of Zola! It made me quite cross . . . Then, this morning, I went to church. (By the way, it's Sunday, isn't it?) The building was packed. No one went out before the sermon. When the parson preached, one or two women cried. I heard them blowing their noses. I really forget what it was about . . . And of course, you know, the *Daily Mail* and lots of other papers have been full, lately, of articles on "The Irreligion of the Upper Ten," and "The Morals of Mayfair." One must be up-to-date. As you suggest, my name offers opportunities."

"Oh, what nonsense you talk!" interposed Hawe with a laugh.

She raised her eyebrows. "Well, you didn't like me serious."

"You're very good to be so keen on my approval."

She flung back her head against the cushion of the cab.

"My dear Toby, you needn't flatter yourself," she

returned with supreme coolness. "Have you really imagined for one minute that I valued your opinion?"

"Of course not," he said quickly, and laughed rather foolishly. "Of course not. I was joking. As if you cared—well, I'm not quite such a conceited ass."

His voice took on a tone vaguely sentimental. Pia laughed softly. For a while neither spoke.

Then—"Seriously," said she, "d'you believe in principles?"

"What are principles?" said Hawe.

"I don't quite know," she answered. "That's just what I'm trying to find out. Then I can judge whether they are worth having. There seem to be some people, who have settled convictions of right and wrong, by which they rule all their actions. It must be very comforting. Having a choice, I suppose one would always go right—at least there would be no excuse for doing otherwise, would there? Besides, there'd be a satisfaction in feeling one had a beautiful and spotless character. The latest idea is that it shows in your face, you know. They say you are plain or good-looking according to the looseness or severity of your morals, and all the beauty-doctors are taking up the argument. Some of their advertisements are splendid—"Madame So-and-So's Complexion Cream, when used by a person of peaceful temperament and irreproachable morals is an infallible beautifier," etc. Then, on application, they'll send you testimonials, signed by ladies whose names are chiefly familiar owing to their notoriety. Whereby there seems hope for all of us. But it's rather confusing."

"I wouldn't let it bother me," said Hawe, chuckling.

"Wouldn't you? Oh, nonsense! I'm sure you would. You're essentially reasonable. You'd be bound to want everything proved, and you'd never be content unless you could learn the causes of all effects. You'd delight in fundamentals. Fundamentals! Isn't that a splendid word? The coloured young man who sat next to me at dinner talked all about those sort of things. He was very scientific and I was very mystified."

"Then he wasn't amusing?"

"Oh, yes—very. He grew perkier, too, as dinner progressed. . . . The champagne was vile, wasn't it?"

"Yes; I daresay we'll suffer for it to-morrow."

"To-morrow? Why, to-morrow I may be myself. That sounds bad, doesn't it? How does the line go? I don't often quote poetry. It's a pernicious habit."

"That's Omar," said Hawe. "You've read him? Yes, I know the verse—

"Ah! my beloved, fill the cup that clears
To-day of past regrets and future fears,
To-morrow——"

"I don't think the fizz they gave us to-night would have any effect on past regrets," interposed Pia with a giggle.

"Oh, I don't know," said Hawe thoughtfully.

"Then it cleared them for you?"

"Yes. After dinner I felt blissfully free from all worries."

"Did you? How nice! Sometimes to be 'complete,' as the French have it, soothes the nerves in quite a wonderful way, don't you think?"

"That would prove the stomach to be the ruler of destiny."

"Don't be coarse, Toby. Give that portion of our anatomy its proper nickname."

"Oh! I'd forgotten—'Little Mary.' When I first came back to London it sounded odd to hear everyone using the phrase. It took me a good time to learn."

"I can't make out," said Pia gravely, "why we haven't given fancy names to all the rest of our parts. We might, for instance, call our appendices 'Adolphus.' As far as I can see, it would be quite as *apropos*. But we were talking about 'past regrets.' Have you got any—beyond remorse for drinking that champagne?"

Hawe remained silent, gazing straight before him.

The cab was nearing its destination. It had just turned from Knightsbridge into Sloane Street.

"Have you?" repeated Pia, rather curiously.

"Yes," he answered, and paused; then opened his mouth to speak again, but changed his intention, and shut his lips abruptly.

"Worries?" queried Pia, looking at him.

He nodded.

"Poor old Toby!" she said sympathetically. "I know what it's like. I'm in debt up to my eyes, and the duns I get are simply awful. Positively, I sometimes can't sleep at night."

"It isn't a question of bills with me," said Hawe slowly.

She laughed. "Then it can't be very bad." She waited, and added, "Is it?"

"Yes," he answered again.

"Poor fellow!" she repeated softly. "Can I help?"

"No, I don't think so, thanks, Pia. You see," he said, turning towards her with a little smile, "it's a question of principles."

"Oh!" she said with a slight gasp.

The hansom stopped abruptly.

"You'll come in and have a whisky-and-soda, won't you?" she said, as he helped her to alight.

"Thanks," answered Hawe, "I will."

He paid the cabman, and she opened the door with her latchkey. The electric light was burning in the narrow hall. Pia led the way up the stairs. "We'll find drinks in the drawing-room," she said, over her shoulder. "I expect the servants'll have gone to bed. I don't expect them to sit up late on Sundays. It doesn't seem fair. By the way, what is the time?"

Sidney looked at his watch.

"Just eleven," he returned.

She paused at the drawing-room door, and switched on the lights before they entered. Two glass globes shaded with pink silk shone, on either side of the Chinese embroidery, above the mantelpiece. There were other lights at intervals upon the walls, and the inner room was illuminated dimly by a standard electric lamp shaded with red. On the little low Moorish table was set a silver tray, bearing a cut-glass decanter of

spirit, two syphons, and some tumblers. There was also a plate of biscuits.

"Mix your own drink and sit down," said Pia.

She walked into the inner room and removed her hat in front of the mirror. Hawe observed her as she patted her hair into shape. She returned presently with a box of cigarettes and some matches. They both smoked.

"I must go and fetch Cachou!" exclaimed Mrs. Hamlyn suddenly. "He'll be upstairs. Wait here."

She left the room, and he could hear the rustling of her dress as she mounted the stairs. She reappeared, after a few moments, with the little brown Pom, blinking at the light, in her arms.

"Poor baby!" she said. "He's so sleepy; says his mummy's a horrid, cruel woman to take him out of warm beddy-bies at such an hour. Never mind, my darling. Wouldn't it like ickle drop o' whisky-and-soda?"

She sat down with her pet in her lap, dipped a finger in the tumbler she held, and moistened Cachou's nose.

Hawe laughed.

"You treat the little beast as though it were human."

"Cachou," returned Pia, "is infinitely superior to any human being I have ever known."

"In what way?"

"Well, he's never told me a lie, and he's never done me a bad turn. He's always been sweet and soft, and lovable and sympathetic. He's perfect."

Hawe bent and stroked the little creature's head. "I suppose no man or woman can attain perfection," he said meditatively, "not even by the aid of principles."

"That helps me to a conclusion," said Pia. "To put it figuratively—for that is easier—black and white don't exist, for as we haven't sufficient light of knowledge to be perfect, there can't be sufficient shadow of ignorance for us to be altogether bad. We live in a sort of twilight—uncertainty of any rule, and doubt of

any creed, so all our actions must be obscure, and the best of us can only be grey souls."

"Yes," said Hawe eagerly.

He had seated himself near Pia, in a low chair.

"Yes, but surely there are gradations of grey. Some are dark, storm-coloured, like a cloud. Others are of the shade of silver. And—here's the gist of it: the character that is of a deeper grey has become so by the choice of its owner."

"No," she answered slowly; "no—not always. At least, I don't believe it. There are other forces that count: outer circumstances, heredity, opportunity——"

"And against those, will-power, which the man should have cultivated, till it was infinitely strong to overcome."

"Oh, you, with your will-power!" said Pia lightly. Then she ceased for a moment to fondle Cachou, and looked at her companion. "I didn't know we were especially talking about a man," she said interrogatively.

Hawe regarded the tip of his cigarette with some concentration.

"As a matter of fact," he said, "I was thinking of my own case. You know—I haven't been a particularly good lot."

"What nonsense! As if it mattered, anyway."

"It does," said Hawe. "At least, one episode matters"—suddenly. "I really never expected it to have any effect. You see, I once played rather low down on a chap, and afterwards I meant to make it all right. In fact, I did make amends. I paid him back the amount for which I was responsible. I don't see why I should have bothered about the rest. And—anyway, he didn't know what he was saying at the time."

"Excuse me," said Pia, "but I really don't understand. You're not very lucid. Who did what, and why?"

"May I tell you about it?" said Hawe abruptly. As he spoke he rose, and knocked the ash from his cigarette, with great care, into a little silver receptacle that stood on a table.

CHAPTER XVI.

HE thrust his hands into his pockets and began to pace the room, staring at the floor.

"All right. Go on. I'm listening," said Pia, regarding him in some surprise. Hawe took the cigarette from his mouth, and stopped to sip at the tumbler of whiskey-and-soda that he had left on the tray. Then he flung himself on to the sofa.

"I hardly know how to begin," he said slowly. "I'm wondering how it will sound, in so many words." He waited, then continued. "It's a case of one-sided friendship. There was a chap who would have done anything for me, and I didn't care about him a button. In fact, it was worse; I took advantage of him. You see, he was a bit of a fool—weak-minded and so on; though I suppose I shouldn't say so—he's dead."

"If you're going to tell me a story, do you think that you could manage to begin at the beginning?" interposed Pia, a trifle plaintively. "Somehow, I think it would have more sequence. Of course, I don't know."

"It isn't a joke," said Hawe, rather fiercely, and leant his elbow against the cushions of the couch, and his head on his clenched fist.

The faintly cynical smile faded from the woman's face, and she leant forward on her chair with an almost tender look in her eyes.

"Oh, Toby!—I'm sorry," she said.

For a few moments Hawe smoked in silence. Then—"D'you know what it feels like to take everything and give nothing in return—I mean with regard to friendship?"

"I should hardly call that friendship," she answered judicially.

"Well, perhaps not, as it's an essentially mutual

relation. There was no reciprocation, between this chap and myself. If you understand, we weren't a scrap sympathetic to one another. But he could never have grasped the fact. He was a good bit younger than me. He liked me when first we knew each other, and his doing so always annoyed me. That's a long time ago now—five—six—seven years."

"Before you went out to South Africa?"

"Yes."

"What was his name?"

"Reesdale—Jim Reesdale."

"Well?"

"Well, when I left England we used to write to each other. I think his letters used to irritate me even more than his conversation. Poor chap! I was a brute, and he trusted me. There's where I was such a cad—to take advantage."

Hawe's tone was low and meditative, as though after much deliberation he had arrived at a clear opinion of his own character.

Mrs. Hamlyn stroked the Pom's coat backwards.

"But you never wanted him to trust you," she said thoughtfully.

"That doesn't make it any better," he answered sharply. Then he continued, in his usual slow, level voice, "In fact—I'm not sure—perhaps—I did want him to trust me. You see, I was unscrupulous. I meant to make use of him. As it was, I borrowed money off him, time and again. I—I wasn't very particular about paying it back either. That shows you what sort of chap I was. I—well, I didn't care, you see. Hadn't much idea of principles, anyway."

He smiled, but his eyes were full of insufferable memories.

"And in the colonies, when a fellow's not inclined to keep straight, he finds the other course, easy enough. But I'm hedging. I'll go right on and tell you what happened. I used to write to Reesdale sometimes, and give him advice about investments. When I was in the mining business, I'd pick up information, you see. That

was so in the Transvaal, and the same when I went to British Columbia. And once or twice I helped him to make money. So he got bitten with the fever of it."

"Still, you did help him," interposed Pia eagerly.

"Oh no, not much, and I daresay I had the devil's own motive. All this while, you see, I was beastly poor—lived like a navvy and worked like a convict. Oh, we weren't luxurious. Yet there were advantages." A smile came into Hawe's eyes. "You wouldn't think mealies and bacon nice, unless you were starving. Then they're delicious. It's grand to feel hungry and sit down to a board where there's plenty. And the other boys were good enough company. Bit of a row sometimes, and out with their guns before you could say 'Knife.' Otherwise, there were good times. We'd have smokers, don't you know, in one of the cabins, where, what with the air as thick as a fog with baccy and steam, and what with the smell of humanity and liquor, one had to get outside every five minutes to breathe."

Pia laughed. "That's one way of enjoying yourself. Well?"

"Ah!—but when one was outside—out in the clean air—on the prairie! My God! how the feel of it comes back!"

Hawe gazed down the room with dreamy eyes, as though he saw far beyond the walls. There was a silence. Then he gave a little half-shamed laugh. "There's a fascination about it," he continued, speaking casually, as though with an effort. "The immensity—the freedom—the silence. The land's like an ocean solidified. There's the same vast expanse—there are the very waves, great rounded billows of green, looking as though they had been suddenly arrested from rolling on. . . . And it gives one the impression that the earth is greater than the sea. The ocean is always restless, but over the prairie there's peace."

"How you show me what it must be like," said Pia, softly. "Oh, I would give anything to see it."

Hawe glanced at her quizzically.

"I don't expect you'd like it—specially. I mean, a woman would soon get tired of the loneliness. And it's a rough life."

Pia's cheeks suddenly coloured.

"I don't think you know the sort of things I like," she said, and paused, as though expecting him to speak. He remained silent, and she continued, rather forcedly, "Haven't we left the main point?"

"Yes, of course——" said Hawe, abstractedly. "Of course—Where was I? . . . Well, in those days—that was a year or two ago—I wasn't blessed with much of the world's goods. And my fortunes fluctuated. Sometimes I was about penniless. Then I'd save some of my wages, and for a while be fairly flush. There's where the grind came in: to have to dig for other people. I never could afford to buy a claim of my own. But there were companies started, d'you see, and I had gambled a bit and lost, and that's how my cash went. I was unlucky, and perhaps rather green, and I had always held on just too long. Then an idea for making money occurred to me. It was the devil's own temptation, and I took the bait. I saved up and bought shares, and then wrote to the chap at home, and said I could put him in the way of a good thing. There was a man, 'a pal of mine,' I put it, who'd be willing to do a deal with him. Then I misquoted the prices, so as to make out that the value was a lot higher. I pretended, you see, that the top figure was, in fact, the lowest, and that the price was bound to go up, when really I knew that it was just going to fall. I sold him the shares, and he was fool enough to trust me and hang on, until they were worth so much waste paper. . . . And I believe I cursed him for being such an idiot, and making the swindle so easy for me, but I went on playing the game, and rooking him until I had got sufficient to buy a claim. . . . Just think, if the chap had got the common-sense of a child, he'd have found out the truth in the papers. And instead, he put his faith in me even wrote and said, 'it was so far preferable to do business privately than to deal with stockbrokers, whom he had

always heard were unreliable.' You know, it was laughable. And I think his gullibility made me mad—I didn't care a damn. I remember thinking 'that fools were only made to go under. And I salved my conscience, or the part of me that made some faint protest, with the promise of repayment when I should make my pile."

As Hawe continued his story, he lapsed instinctively into the colloquialisms that belonged, by custom, to the life of which he spoke. Pia leant forward in her chair, listening intently to every word he uttered, but betraying by neither speech nor sign her opinion. Only her attitude conveyed the impression of overwhelming interest.

For a few moments, the man sat silently puffing at his cigarette. He watched the little grey clouds of smoke as they drifted away from him and above his head, as though absorbed in following their ever-changing form. The woman gazed at him attentively. Presently he continued, in a matter-of-fact tone, "Of course that's how it ended; I mean, I did make money, and I bought a claim, and it prospered, and then I got sick of mining and started a ranch further West. I took up cattle. They paid very well. In the meantime, you see, Reesdale had been hanging on to all his little bits of paper, imagining that they represented so much invested money—some hundreds, in fact—and that he could realise on them any day he liked. . . . Well, you see, then I came home. My chief reason was to look him up, and make it right. Funnily enough, I met him, by accident, the first day I was back in town. He said he was awfully glad to see me, and all that, don't you know—gushed like a woman. . . . It somehow made me feel furious, as much with myself as with him. Anyway, I said, 'Come in to-night, and we'll have a chat,' and he said he'd got a dinner on somewhere, and would come and see me afterwards. Well, I thought the sooner I'd made a clean breast of it the better, didn't you see? and I got the notes to pay him back the amount, and I told myself, 'After all, it will only have been a loan'; and I thought, 'Anyway, it'll be

the end of our pretending to be pals.' So he turned up. I believe it was about eleven o'clock the same night, and I was unpacking, d'you see? There was some of my baggage about the room, and things lying round—a few books, don't you know, and little belongings like that. And, among the rest, a pair of guns—six-shooters—revolvers, I mean. They're a jolly good couple. I always travel with one of 'em on me, though it is against the law, I know. It's just a habit, and I can't unlearn it. And I always keep one of them loaded, d'you see. Out there, it's just a safeguard; and over here—well, it never occurred to me to alter my ways. And, anyhow, there they were, lying on the table, just where I'd laid them down."

Hawe paused again.

Latterly a sense of excitement had seemed to underlie his speech. His words came disjointedly; he indulged a nervous habit of interrogation. At the same time, he appeared to be exercising self-control. With one of his hands, he clutched the yielding surface of a sofa-cushion.

"So, he turned up, d'you see, and—well, to put it mildly, there wasn't much doubt about his having dined. And his mood was maudlin. However, he asked for a peg—said he felt fuddled, don't you know, and that would put it right. And I was fool enough to give it him. Well, he started punishing the whiskey, which wasn't likely to improve his reasoning faculties—and then—I don't know why—I behaved like a bally idiot, and came out with the whole affair—owned up—told him it was his own fault anyway, and piled on the agony, don't you know? I did that for a reason. I wanted to sicken him of me, right off. . . . Well, don't you know, what happened was, that I succeeded beyond my expectations."

Hawe suddenly looked across at Pia and smiled. Their eyes met. Hers shone like two narrow jewels. Her expression was almost feline in its intent watchfulness.

"Well?" she said. "Well?" and bent rather more forward.

The man gave a little laugh, purely nervous. With his hand he rolled the sofa-cushion over and held it yet more firmly.

"What happened, you see," he said, "was too silly. If it were written down it would be the sort of thing you'd read in *Tit-Bits*, and you'd call it melodramatic rot, and say it was impossible. Only, at the time, that didn't occur to me. It was rather exciting, and yet ludicrous too, don't you know? And, first, he started crying—on the maudlin tack, and I laughed at him, and gave him the notes, and said, 'Clear.' Then he changed round and flung down the paper, and got on his feet (he'd sat all crumpled up in a chair, you see), and started striding up and down, or rather staggering to and fro and cursing. I just sat still and laughed. You see, I was mad, with myself and him. . . . Well, presently, he got up against a table, and hung on to it, and for a moment or two spoke lucidly. It amounted to this. He'd speculated far more than I ever imagined—under an assumed name, d'you see—and had judged of his investments more or less for himself, though he'd started on my advice. And apparently, he'd borrowed most of the money, d'you see; and—well, it wasn't a sure enough thing for any man in his senses to consent to back him, so—he'd just written the name of a chap he knew, on the promissory note, and now stood to be found out—over forgery. . . . Because, you see, he'd lost all round. Every investment had failed. He had no more idea of business than a rabbit. And, instead of some hundreds, he'd thrown away thousands, and owed those. Well, then I just felt mad! D'you see, it seemed I was responsible, and yet, literally, it wasn't my fault, and I wasn't going to own up to it. So I said, 'I don't see what that's got to do with me, or words to that effect, sneering at him. And he lost his head again, and started once more on the raving and cursing tack. And, you bet, there was a row. . . . Well, I kept cool, d'you see, and I know I said, 'You're drunk. Clear, and take the money with you. You may think yourself jolly lucky to have got that

back. Anyway, clear. Quit. You make me tired.' Then he intimated that he'd be damned if he'd go, unless I'd agree to make reparation and pay his debts as well. And I said, 'Be damned, then ; I don't mind.' And then, you know, he took a big breath, and looked round, as though he were hunted, and, all in a minute, he seemed to see my gun that lay on the table, and he seemed to know by some queer instinct that it was loaded, and before I could say 'Knife,' he'd snatched it up. He gave a sort of sob, don't you see, and leaned over the back of a chair, and had me covered. Well; I'd been in some tight places before. . . . But I knew he was so jolly drunk that he might fire any minute, and hit me by a fluke. And I sat looking at him. Then he said, 'Hawe, I shall shoot you, and then I'll kill myself,' and he spoke quite soberly, but with a catch in his voice, you know, like a woman when she's trying not to cry. And, as luck would have it, I was sitting in one of those low armchairs, and my hand hung over the edge and touched a pile of books on the floor. I picked up one, and let fly at the very moment he fired. Well, you know, it was rather a good shot—mine, I mean. It knocked the gun down out of his hand. And he aimed at my head. But I'll allow he scored a point too, for the bally thing went off, and hit me, after all, in the knee. There was a nasty smart, don't you know, and then it was more or less numb. And I got on my feet, feeling madder than ever. The chap was bending to pick up the gun, and I made a rush at him and snatched it out of his fingers, and stuck it in my pocket. Then I got him by the shoulders, and ran him out of the room, and shoved him down the stairs, so that he fell. And all the time he was blaspheming like a trooper and crying like a child. For my part, I don't think I said much. I wanted my breath. But I remember the queer feeling of having something warm and sticky running down my leg."

Hawe stopped abruptly, rose from his seat, and threw away the stump of his cigarette. Then, with hands in his pockets, he walked to the mantelpiece, and

appeared to regard some of the framed photographs thereon with interest. Pia's gaze followed him. "And then?" she questioned eagerly.

Hawe turned and regarded her, pulling at his moustache.

"Go on," she said impatiently. "That isn't all. What happened?"

"I really don't exactly remember," he answered, with a deprecating smile.

"Why?"

"Well, you see, I got back into my room and locked the door—and I have a vague recollection of dreading to leave the support it offered. Some time afterwards, I seemed to wake up, lying on my face on the floor. Then I began to feel rather bad. And I got up, and sat in a chair, and examined my knee, and that didn't make me feel any better. Anyway, I had the sense to tie it up with a sort of tourniquet—a paper-knife and a handkerchief. And when I tried to move, it was the very devil, and things went round. After some time I got to bed. You see, I wanted to keep the matter dark, and next day I got up and sat about, so that my landlady shouldn't suspect. It was rather funny. I remember, she said something about a noise the night before, and I said I'd been moving boxes. Then, 'I woke up and thought I heard an explosion,' she said, 'like a pistol-shot.' She's a shrewd woman; and I laughed, and said she'd dreamt it. There was my game leg as well—she was rather suspicious—so I made up a yarn about an old inflammation that came on unexpectedly—the result of a riding accident. I made light of it too, for I didn't want a fuss."

"And the other man—what happened to him?" interposed Pia.

"Well—I was coming to that. The next day—it was Sunday, by the way—my first English Sabbath for years—things began to happen."

"Began?" commented Pia, with a little laugh.

"Oh! I mean I came in for the results, don't you

know. About the middle of the morning, while I was still in bed, a messenger came from St. George's Hospital. Reesdale had been run over by a motor-bus near Hyde Park Corner. They'd found out his name from his clothes, but there was no address on him, except mine—a letter that he'd written me and enclosed in an envelope. He'd evidently meant to post it. It was stamped. And they wanted me to go there, said he was all smashed up—couldn't last, don't you know? Well, I got up and went, best pace, and all the time I was wondering—d'you see, it seemed so queer after what had happened!"

"Run over by a motor-bus," repeated Mrs. Hamlyn meditatively. "Why, that's the case about which you told me, soon after we came across each other again. Don't you remember—the day you came to lunch? Reesdale—I thought the name seemed familiar. And there was something about a girl."

Hawe thrust his hands in his pockets, and looked down at the floor. After a moment—"Yes," he said, "a girl. He was engaged to be married."

"Of course. I remember you told me. And—you had to go and break the news to her, didn't you? What was the name? Courtney—or something like that?"

"Courtfield."

"Oh, yes—and she lived in West Kensington and you were going to call. How queer! Have you kept up the acquaintance?"

"Yes," returned Hawe in a non-committal tone, and once more turned to regard the ornaments on the mantelpiece, with the intention of hiding his face, which he could feel had grown hot.

"And, in the meanwhile, what happened? I mean, was that the end of it?" persisted Pia.

"No," he answered, in an odd tone. "I think it was about the beginning."

"What d'you mean?"

"Well, don't you see, there was the letter that was found in his pocket. At first, I forgot about it. Then I opened it." Hawe paused again.

"You opened it?" she repeated eagerly. The man once more turned towards her a face that had grown sallow.

"You see—he'd written to say, he meant to commit suicide."

Another silence. They stared into each other's faces. At last Pia spoke.

"You mean—the motor-bus—it wasn't an accident?"

Hawe pulled at his moustache.

"Well," he replied slowly, "that is just what occurred to me. I read the letter through, and jumped to a conclusion. It knocked the breath out of me a bit . . . Then, I had the sense to think it over. There were one or two points that struck me oddly. First, I doubted the chap's pluck; then, to get run over isn't a very sure way of suicide. You're only likelier to get damaged. Also, the letter, which was an hysterical sort of effusion, made mention that he meant to get out of the way—to disappear—d'you see—that I wasn't to try and track him—(as if I'd want to)—but I could flatter myself that I'd have his self-imposed death at my door."

"Good heavens!"

"Exactly," said Hawe coolly. "That was my sensation. And yet, I couldn't quite make it out. It seemed a queer sort of revenge for a chap to take—and it was apparent that somehow he'd bungled. Then an idea occurred to me. I went straight off to the hospital, and asked if they'd found anything else besides the letter in Reesdale's clothes; and they showed me a pocket-book. In it there were a few bank-notes, some stamps, and——" Hawe stopped and smiled rather ironically. Pia sat like a sculptured figure, and her eyes never left his face.

"A ticket: the evidence of his intention to sail by the next Australian liner," concluded Hawe.

CHAPTER XVII.

Pia laughed. It was as though a strain, which had lain on them both, had suddenly given way. Even there seemed to be relief in the atmosphere. The woman rose from her chair, still holding the little brown Pom under one arm, moved to the table, poured some soda-water into a tumbler and drank it. Then, having put down the glass, she flung back her head with a gesture almost defiant, and turned to face Hawe, who had not changed his position. Their gaze met. He could have fancied that her eyes held an expression of pride.

"Well, Toby," she said, "you haven't a bad way of telling a story. I was quite thrilled. Only, now I'd rather like to know your reason."

"My reason?" he repeated blankly.

"Silly," she said, smiling. "I'm flattered by your confidence, but what prompted you to give it to me?"

"'Pon my word, Pia, I hardly know," he replied.

In rather a boyish attitude, he stood regarding her and rattling some change in his pocket.

Mrs. Hamlyn laughed again, and set Cachou down on a sofa-cushion, where he immediately curled round and went to sleep. She took another cigarette from the box on the table, and lighted it, before she spoke again.

"Anyway," she continued then, "what's your worry, Toby? That's where we started. You said you were bothered and referred to a question of principles."

She sat down on the sofa, and laid her hand on the body of the Pom, who protested with a faint little grunt.

"I may be a hardened woman," she added, and regarded Hawe with cynical screwed-up eyes, "but I really can't see what you meant."

For a moment he did not reply. Then—"You know, I was to blame," he said slowly.

"Not for the man's death."

"No. But—don't you see? that was only a fluke—my luck. If it hadn't been for the accident, I should have been responsible."

"But he didn't mean to commit suicide."

"No, not literally. Yet, I can't help thinking! You see the sort of chap he was. Of course he must have had more grit than I imagined, ever to have thought of the Colonies. Still—if he'd gone out there, he'd have been bound to go under. He was weak, don't you know, physically and mentally. And it would have been my fault."

Hawe spoke vaguely, but in his tone there was intense depression. The reaction from his nervous excitement took the form of an equally unnatural state of self-abasement.

Pia spoke softly. "But Toby"—she began, and continued—"No, I don't understand. You can't blame yourself for what didn't happen. And, anyway, it's past and irrevocable. After all, you did what you could to make amends, and it *was* his fault for behaving like a fool."

Hawe gave her a quick glance.

"It wasn't," he said abruptly. "You know it wasn't."

There was a silence.

Then—"I swindled him," he added coolly, as though stating a fact.

Pia did not answer.

Presently he continued: "I think my reason for telling you was, that I wanted your opinion. D'you see, I'd like to know how it strikes a woman." He paused; then, without looking at her, went on: "If the girl he had been going to marry knew how I'd behaved, what do you suppose she'd say?"

Pia looked bewildered. "Why?" she questioned involuntarily.

"Well, d'you see, I was received as Reesdale's friend. Apparently he'd already given her and her sister to understand that I was his greatest pal. They even knew my name, by hearsay. And consequently they've been very nice to me."

"And now you know them quite well?"

"Yes."

"Then, unless you chose, I don't see the necessity for ever letting them know the true state of affairs. The man's dead. Your relation with him is of the past."

Hawe shifted uncomfortably from one foot to the other.

"Yes ; but supposing I felt it was the straight thing to own up, and tell them just what happened?"

Pia shrugged her shoulders.

"Well, then, I suppose you'd do it. Here, I presume, we come to principles. Frankly, the impulses they engender seem to me awkward. And I think a confession would be tactless. Still——" She broke off abruptly, and eyed him with some curiosity. "Are you anxious to stand well with these people?" she concluded.

Hawe hesitated momentarily.

"Ye—es," he replied, with purposed nonchalance.

She nodded wisely, but before she could speak he continued : "Though that's not the point. If she—if they knew, what d'you suppose they'd think?"

Pia raised her eyebrows.

"The girl would probably be rather upset, wouldn't she? At least she'd have been fond of her *fiancé*, and would consequently regard you as a brute."

Hawe seemed to take a deep breath.

For a moment he stared before him silently. Then with an odd inflection of his voice, "You think that?" he said.

Pia misunderstood the application of the words. The colour rushed to her pale cheeks, and once more she flung back her head with the same defiant movement.

"I?" she said : "why, no, of course not!"

She gave a little laugh and leant forward, looking at him intently. "You mayn't have played fair—you may have been unprincipled, but still—I don't care—I don't care."

She appeared to pull herself up abruptly, with a

catch of the breath. It was as though she hesitated on the brink of saying more.

Hawe's level tones interposed.

"Thanks, Pia. You know I value your good opinion, but I don't deserve it."

"Reasons don't count with a woman," she said softly; "I've told you that before. And our sense of justice must always be comparative."

"Must it?" Hawe smiled. "Why?"

"Do you need to be taught the A B C of feminine motives?" she returned audaciously.

"I haven't known many women," he said simply.

"And so you're content to regard the sex as a mystery?" She made her favourite little grimace. "Oh! most wise man—most wise, to be content with ignorance. You should have been a monk."

He smiled again. "Hardly; I am far too interested in the eternal query."

"Of womanhood? I see. But it seems to me you're a trifle unenterprising. Have you never tried to find an answer?"

"There isn't any answer," he replied with a laugh.

"There is," she said; "there is! Oh! how blind you are!"

She flung herself back against the cushions, and tapped a foot on the floor.

Hawe laughed. "Well, it's rather late for an argument, isn't it?" he said. "How I've stayed talking about myself." He took out his watch. "By Jove! Pia, it's nearly twelve. I'd no idea it was so late. I must be off."

He rose. She sat still and regarded him. "By the way," he added abruptly, "I don't believe I told you: I'm going away to-morrow."

Pia leant forward. "Away!" she said; "Where?" Her attitude was rather strained.

Sidney had moved across once more to the mantel-piece. "Only to Brittany," he said lightly; "just for a few weeks. Town's getting so hot."

"Oh, I see!" said Pia; and forced a little laugh.

"Of course; where are you going—what made you think of Brittany, anyway?"

He looked slightly uncomfortable. "It's some place near St. Malo. Some friends of mine are going there. They wanted me to join them."

"Oh, I see!" repeated Pia. "Anyone I know?" she added, after a moment.

"No, I don't think so."

There was a little silence.

"Well, I must be off," he said again.

Mrs. Hamlyn rose to her feet. "Then, I shan't see you again for some time," she said, still staring at him. Her tone was vague and rather troubled.

"In September, I expect. I may come and see you when I come back, mayn't I?"

"Yes," she said. "Oh yes; you may come and see me. . . . Must you really go?" She advanced, took the cigarette-box from the table, and handed it to him.

"Have another smoke?"

"Thanks," he said.

He took one, and she struck a match and held it that he might light the tobacco. For a minute between them shone the little flame. Above it, his face, illumined by the tiny glow, appeared set in an expression intent. His eyes seemed each to hold a small white note of interrogation. Suddenly the match was extinguished. At the same instant the gaze of the man and woman, who stood opposite and rather near one another, met. Pia, with a quick sigh, dropped the little charred splinter, and involuntarily held out her hands. Her lips trembled towards a smile. She seemed to cease to breathe. And Hawe stood bewildered, undecided, the cigarette between his fingers, half-way to his mouth. So quickly that he thought he must have imagined their advance, she withdrew her hands, and laid them, clasped, across her breast. Her breath came pantingly. She turned away her head, then slowly crossed the room, and stood with her back towards him. The next moment, without moving nearer, she faced him once more. Her lips were still half parted in a smile.

"Toby," she said, in her usual half-lazy tone, "don't hurry away. Why should you? I don't mind. Have another drink, anyway?"

The words came so naturally, that he felt confused. It was as though the occurrence of her momentary impulse towards sentiment had existed only in his fancy.

He hesitated. "Oh! thanks very much. I don't think I will. I—er—perhaps I'd better be off."

"As you like," she answered.

She had moved to the mantelpiece, and stood, leaning with one elbow on the shelf.

"As you like," she said, without looking at him; "only—you may as well stay a few minutes and finish your cigarette peacefully."

The absolute coolness of her manner was reassuring. She appeared entirely careless of whether he departed or remained.

"But, you must be tired," said Hawe. "I'm sure you're wanting to turn in."

"My dear man, not in the least," she replied laughing. "As a matter of fact, if you go, I shall probably sit up for another hour, writing notes, or playing patience."

"At this time of night? What nonsense!" he returned lightly, and seated himself in a deep armchair.

"Is it?" she said. "Oh! I daresay. But sometimes, however sleepy I am, I suffer from insomnia. It's wretched. Have you ever had any experience of it? So, I generally sit up, and wait till I'm really too tired to keep my eyes open."

"That must be rather a bore," he commented.

"Yes." She fidgeted nervously with the pearl rope that she wore round her neck. Though her face was within Hawe's view, he found its expression inscrutable.

After a moment, she continued, "There's an odd feeling in sitting up in a house where everyone else is asleep. Don't you know, there's a sort of weird, unnatural stillness, and one can imagine ghosts.

D'you believe in ghosts? I do. Really, they're only memories. I suppose all human beings are haunted. I once read a book called "The Haunted Man." I forget what it was about, but I believe it was gruesome. I can't understand why such matters should generally be considered inseparable from the horrible and the melancholy."

"I suppose all memories are sad," said Hawe meditatively. "Their very nature makes them so. One nearly always regrets the Past, even when it was unpleasant."

"No," she answered quickly. "I don't agree with you. Some people take a morbid delight in reminiscence. That isn't my attitude. I keep memories to myself, anyway."

She shuddered suddenly and turned away her face.

"But after all," she added—and for the first time her voice shook—"the Past was better than the Present."

Hawe was silent. He recognised that she was in trouble.

"Oh! have you ever been lonely?" she continued, with unexpected vehemence, as she faced him once more.

She appeared even paler than her wont. Her eyes were narrowed more than usual, as though she were in pain. "Have you ever been lonely—utterly, quite alone? Of course you haven't. You're a man! I could tell you—D'you know"—Her voice softened, but still retained a faint cynicism—"D'you know, I used to think that in my married life I had reached the lowest depth of wretchedness. Between us there was never the slightest sympathy; but I thought it would be easy to do without love, if only I could know companionship. But there wasn't really even that! I thought there could not be a greater loneliness. Then when he left me, and the excitement was over:—the awful flatness, the emptiness of existence! Good God! Can you imagine it?"

Her voice had grown more and more tremulous. As

she stopped speaking, she opened wide her eyes and blinked them, in an effort to keep back the tears. Her mouth appeared piteously distorted.

After a moment, she continued in a fierce low tone, that betrayed the force of her excitement—"And now I've discovered marriage was only my novitiate. It was, at least, a sharing of life. I remember and can miss the very quarrels—the actual vulgar arguments—and insults! Not that I can want to re-live that time—but oh! I'm alone—alone—and it's hard to bear! It's horrible! It's as though one were buried alive; and the world passes by—on the other side. I watch the people and know that I'm apart by myself. They're like the moving, pictured figures in a cinematograph. Oh! if only I had a friend, who would save me from myself! Oh! if only I'd had a child! D'you see, I've only Cachou, in all the world! A little dog! Without him, I think I'd go mad! Perhaps—already—I'm a little off my head! Cachou's not enough! Oh!—don't you understand what it must be?"

With a frantic gesture she put her hands to her head, ruffling her hair, then pressing her finger-tips to her temples. Her body swayed slightly, and she seemed to have lost all self-control.

Hawe leant forward in his chair.

"Pia," he said gently, as though to recall her to reason. "Pia!"

She gave a little choked exclamation, half-sob, half-expression of impatience, and turning rather away from him, leant both elbows on the mantelpiece, and rested her chin in her hands. Then she continued, in a voice that rose and fell, sinking sometimes to the pitch of a moan, or ascending to husky vehemence.

"Oh! I don't care—I don't care. There are times when one must speak or go mad. I won't go mad—I won't. I wish I were dead. In death would one be more alone! There, now, I'm morbid! But what is there in life? Only the tedious, loathsome social circle. One has to run round and round, till one drops and faints!"

She lifted her head with a gasp, as though in reality she would swoon. Before the man could speak, she went on, faster than before. "D'you see, there's my position, too. By quite nice people," she interposed a hard little broken laugh, "I'm only tolerated—because my husband sinned against me! That's the way of the world. So I fall back on the second-rate. Oh! their wretched vulgarity—how I hate it—hate it!"

She stamped her foot furiously, and with a rush continued—

"For a little sympathy—or for love—I think I'd give my soul!"

Suddenly she swung round and away from the support of the mantelpiece. She stood straight before Hawe, with her head bent forward. Her eyes were narrowed. Her whole frame shook. Her hands clutched at the front of her bodice.

"Don't go," she whispered; "don't leave me—to-night!"

There was a dreadful little silence. The man, on an impulse, rose from his chair. The woman retreated a step.

One moment was tense with expectancy.

In the next, she turned from him and, with bowed shoulders and a face hidden in her hands, sobbed convulsively.

Hawe advanced and put an arm round her shoulder.

"Pia," he repeated softly; "Pia—my dear."

Beneath his touch she shrank, as though physically hurt.

"Don't touch me!" she panted. "Go—go! What have I said?"

He held her more firmly.

"You asked me to stay, Pia. I'm human."

She wrenched herself from his grasp and went to the sofa. She dropped her shoulder and head against the cushions, and sought frantically to wipe away her tears.

"Go!" she reiterated. "Go! I was mad! I wasn't responsible! Go! You can't take advantage. Only go—while I'm sane——"

She sobbed violently.

"I'll not go," said Hawe.

He advanced to the head of the sofa, and stood regarding her. He leant his hands on the end of the couch, and the fingers twitched.

They stared at each other.

Pia's breast still heaved, but it was apparent that she was gradually regaining the mastery of her emotions.

After a moment—"You're a coward," she said.

"You asked me to stay," he repeated.

"I was excited—I raved."

"You can't make excuses. Anyway, you've maddened me as well."

He advanced again. She sprang to her feet.

"Oh!" she exclaimed, "you're a man—and strong—yet—you've no self-control."

In her tone, scorn and personal weakness struggled for expression.

The taunt seemed to reach his inner consciousness. He took a deep breath. Then, for a moment, he stood undecided.

It was apparent that in his mind there was war between deliberate thought and impulse. Gradually his expression gave place to a look that was purely set and stern. Without a word, he turned and moved quickly towards the door.

The woman, with a sharp sigh, took involuntarily a step to follow him. Hawe flung open the door, then paused and looked back to show the strength of his resolve.

"Good-night," he said abruptly.

The next instant he was gone.



PART II.



CHAPTER I.

AN English-speaking person, referring to France, is apt to do so with a proprietary and patronising air, as of one who mentions a dependency of the mother-country. His attitude is partly explainable by the nature of his inborn ideas. To him, France is a group of towns, in any of which he may choose to spend his holiday.

If an American, France is Paris, and Paris for him is Mecca. If a Briton, he will feel that he has an especial right to spend his money in Brittany. But he will carefully keep to the coast, with the instinct that a sea-view will back his sense of possession. He would hardly allow that the English Channel, viewed from France, becomes "La Manche." Such a fact would appeal to the national sense of humour.

The Briton realises weightily that France, as a country, should not be taken seriously. He therefore leaves his own shore, fully prepared to see vice in many forms, and to join in mixed bathing. He spends his holiday in seeking to shield his female relations from contaminating influences, which he finds it necessary personally to investigate for purposes of safeguard. He learns, at length, that the correct thing is to take his own wife and sisters to St. Malo, in Brittany, and his neighbour's wife to Boulogne in the Pas-de-Calais. How he originally came to differentiate between the two places must remain more or less of a problem.

The faint odour of sanctity, that clings to Breton watering-places, with the names that they take from the saints, may be responsible.

A man is seldom keener on the fitness of things than when he indulges the unfit.

Brittany, as a province, is remarkable for its churches.

The shadow of a spire is curiously disarming to an indulgence of the emotions.

At the same time, to most Englishwomen, whatever the nature of their principles, a Catholic church is highly attractive. Venturing within, chiefly from motives of curiosity, they will stay to criticise the pictures, the confessional or the high altar. They will lapse into whispered comments or occasional theological arguments. They will leave the house of God with the conviction that whatever their dogmatic doubts, they believe in the worship of beauty—a worship easily expressed and pleasing to its devotees.

Cecilia Courtfield said that the high altar of the cathedral at St. Malo was very pretty, but somewhat theatrical in design, and that she detested artificial flowers. Incense, she said, made her feel sleepy, but she could quite understand that on some people it might have the effect of prompting them to say their prayers. And (as a concession) it was extremely nice and peaceful, and she thought it delightful to see the way that passing workpeople dropped in to worship.

"It's my opinion," said she, becoming somewhat involved, "that the French are a very devout nation, and I don't believe for a moment that, at heart, the President can be one of those silly Atheists."

"Perhaps not," returned Hawe, to whom she had addressed her remarks.

They walked down St. Malo's principal street, which is paved rudely with cobble-stones and fronted by some good shops. It runs down from the cathedral to one of the gates of the town—the Porte de Dinard. The big old doorway in the wall opens on to the harbour and landing stage. Strangely out of accord with the quaint picturesqueness of the place, steam trams, with snorting engines and clanking cars, pass along the road that fronts the quay.

The destination of these unlovely locomotives may be either the eastward-lying suburb of St. Servan, or the small adjacent town of Paramé.

On this occasion, Hawe had sufficient faith in

"honest doubt" to inquire his way. His French was not of the most classic, but he fully realised the value of gesticulation. Cecilia spoke the language with appalling fluency. Though her accent was doubtful, she was never at a loss for a word. She was careless of idiomatic meanings, and inclined to a fearful familiarity with modes of speech which she did not understand. She delighted in punctuating her phrases with a translation of the essentially English expression, "You know."

"Vous savez," she said now, addressing a tram conductor who stood on the step of one of the cars, "Vous savez—nous voulons aller à St. Servan. Nous demeurons là, moi et mon ami. Quelle est la route—St. Servan—vous savez?"

The man helped her to ascend the step and smiled, showing his white teeth. "V'la, madame. St. Servan—oui—oh, oui! Madame est française, n'est-ce-pas? Non? Ah, quelle bêtise! Eh, bien! Ingleesh, hein? Oh!—ah!—ye-es!"

He smiled more broadly than ever.

Cecilia grinned good-naturedly, set straight her imitation Panama hat, and clutched her holland umbrella firmly. "Odd," she said to Hawe, "how many of these people mistake one for a Frenchwoman. I rather like it. I believe in doing as Rome does, don't you?"

"Does that include a copy of Rome's appearance?" said Hawe, with a faint smile, as he took the tickets.

"It hasn't anything to do with copying or imitation," responded Cecilia in her characteristically abrupt tone. "I suppose one can be adaptable without losing one's individuality, can't one?"

"It's a great gift," he replied with caution.

The tram reached the first *halte*.

Among other people, a French *bourgeoise* mother with three children, and a fat baby in her arms, entered. As the locomotive proceeded, Cecilia smiled at the eldest little girl—a pretty dark-eyed child, of about six years old.

The car was full, and the small maiden had to stand

in the gangway. She steadied herself, by clutching at the knee of Miss Courtfield, who began to make amiable advances.

"Come and sit on my knee," said Cecilia, "venez—assoyez-vous." She lifted the child, and the mother, seated opposite, and next to Hawe, expressed her thanks.

"Let me take the kiddy," said Sidney.

"Oh, no—she isn't heavy. Quel est votre nom?" proceeded Cecilia.

"Louise."

"Louisa? Oh! c'est joli."

She continued to make conversation, with an inordinate pride in her knowledge of the language.

Presently the friendly conductor leaned forward. He appeared to be privately acquainted with Louise.

"Madame aime les p'tits enfants?" he said.

"Oh! oui," said Cecilia.

"Ah." The conductor chucked Louise beneath the chin. "Madame en a peut-être?"

"Quoi?" said Cecilia. "What does he say?" she added, appealing to Hawe, whose understanding of French was more advanced than his faculty for speaking it.

"Vous en avez, des bébés peut-être?" said the friendly conductor, speaking as man to man, and glancing from Sidney to Cecilia.

"Oh! non," said Hawe, quickly. "Non—ce n'est pas—mademoiselle n'est pas——"

"Tiens!" said the conductor, with raised eyebrows, "mais c'est dommage—cela!" Cecilia, with some presence of mind and a vivid blush, started a different topic of conversation.

"I wonder what Maisie will have been doing during our absence," she observed to Hawe.

"She told me she was going to write letters," he replied.

Such obvious remarks helped to cover their mutual confusion, and for a time. Cecilia was well content to ignore the French language.

She had conscientiously practised it for the past week, since her arrival with her sister in the country.

Hawe had joined them at the *pension*, where they had elected to stay, a few days after their own advent. The attraction of Maisie's presence was for him, in this change of residence, the sole advantage. Boarding houses, where the terms are inexpensive, are characteristically much the same on either side of the Channel. There is a difference alone in the name (which in its Gallic form has perhaps a youthful and more euphonious sound suggestive of a girls' school), and in the *cuisine*. The type of the inmates is curiously alike. In Brittany, as in Britain, there can be met the representative old lady who suffers from bronchitis, wears in the hottest weather a shawl of doubtful colour and appearance, and delights to air her views on the absorbing topic of the whereabouts of the lost tribes of Israel.

At the *pension* where the Courtfields had decided to spend their holiday, English visitors resided in the majority. Among others, there were a clergyman of low-church proclivities, with his wife and a family of seven; a grass-widow of handsome appearance and dubious reputation; and a young man, intended for the army, who chose rather to improve his knowledge of the world by association with the lady last mentioned, than to advance his acquaintance with the French tongue, which was supposed to be a feature of his cramming.

"Allons! Never mind," the grass-widow, whose conversation was interspersed glibly with French expressions, had been overheard to say. "Don't worry about the language—mon brave. C'la vient, when once you know la femme! All right—yes—you shall take me to the Casino this evening. Meanwhile, another cigarette. Let's live, and be chic, hein?"

"Without being bizarre," said the young man, and thought himself not only witty but wicked.

Besides these characters, two Frenchmen occupied rooms at the *pension*. One was an author, familiarly known in Paris to gutter fame. According to Maisie,

who found him charming, he wore extremely pretty ties, and in conversation was apt to be surprising. His name was Fritton.

The second Frenchman, Monsieur Limarde, was a friend of the author. He was an elderly man, and wore a fierce grey moustache. His manners were delightful, and he lost no opportunity of proclaiming to women his respect for the weaker sex. He attached himself to Cecilia, who found the expression of his chivalrous sentiments highly attractive.

Hawe spent his time in the company of Maisie. He had at first imagined that there was nothing in the world he desired besides the enjoyment of her continual presence, but after the first week of *pension* life he grew slightly weary of the daily routine. The girl appeared to expect him as her constant cavalier. He had left England to follow her, with the conviction that he would make this an opportunity to declare his love. Before they had parted, he knew that he desired her as his wife. She had many of the qualities that he most admired in woman, and he could not resist drawing a comparison between her and Pia Hamlyn, to the latter's disadvantage. The occasion of his deliberately doing so followed immediately on the scene, in which he had taken leave of the woman, the night before his departure. He had driven back to his rooms, conscious of an indefinable excitement, that pulsed in all his veins.

He had not imagined that she had it in her power still to rouse his passion, nor, having roused it, that she had sufficient influence over him to thwart its fulfilment. He recognised himself as a man not easily aroused, but he considered that, when once he lost his head, no power besides his own could stay the course he meant to run. Pia had awakened his brute instinct by her self-revelation and invitation; then, suddenly aware of the enormity of her expression, she had in the same moment controlled herself and the man.

With supreme diplomacy, she had recalled him to faith in the strength of his own will.

He had left her house, raging with inward passion, which had gradually given place to a sense of huge surprise. In all honesty, he had realised that Pia could command him more entirely than he could command himself. The thought had been humiliating, but so present as to have shadowed the consideration of the shamefulness of her conduct. The woman was stronger than he. He could not investigate the motives of her self-revelation, till he had properly grasped the fact that her words had caused his blood to leap, convincing him for the moment that, after all, he loved her.

On the same memorable night, arrived at his chambers, he had sat up into the early hours of the morning pondering an unanswerable question: Was the old love more powerful than the new? Had it, with regard to Pia, been only dormant instead of dead? Was his affection for Maisie only a passing attraction?

Dawn had brought no solution of the problem, but he had come to the conviction that, when he found himself in the girl's company, the situation would be clearer.

Either continual thoughts of Pia would disturb his peace of mind and draw him once more to her side, or he would be able to forget the incident. He had thereupon lapsed into a consideration of her conduct.

"Now—what exactly did she say?" he asked himself, in thought, on the morning after the event. "I believe, as a matter of fact, I was feeling a bit fuddled. I was in a fearfully confidential mood, I know. Then—poor old Pia! She seemed very upset and unhappy. And she was crying—of course. By Jove! she made me feel as though I were having a series of electric shocks down the spine. Anyway, I believe we both made rather fools of ourselves. Only, she pulled up. Odd! There was that filthy fizz at dinner—and afterwards the music—and the dark. Somehow it made one excited. I'd give something to know how she felt. Was she acting—over-tired—upset—feeling a bit sentimental? Or can she—no, hang it all I don't believe she cares. Why should she?"

Hawe tied his tie, and regarded himself in the glass.

"I suppose I'm not repulsive," he thought. "The question is—would a woman who cared give the show away? I think not. Still—it was queer. Poor old Pia!"

In the meantime, he had anticipated his meeting with Maisie, whom he had not seen for a week, with some excitement.

He was so intent on conjecturing whether or no he would feel thrilled by his first glimpse of her, that he had found it easy to experience a sensation of pure delight, as they had greeted each other. He had thereupon sought to dismiss all thoughts of Pia from his mind. In the succeeding days, however, his success in accomplishing this detachment of thought had waned, so that now he once more found himself troubled by uncertainties, as to the state of his affections.

His present attitude rendered it not only possible, but agreeable to him to accompany Cecilia, whose companionship was always more or less stimulating, in preference to remaining with Maisie, whose continued society palled. He had found that daily discussions of poetry, and other subjects that he had never considered absorbingly interesting, with however fascinating a girl, contained unforeseen drawbacks. He had even entertained the idea of fleeing from the *pension*, and its unsympathetic inmates, before he should further commit himself or render the younger Miss Courtfield conspicuous by his attentions. The notion was unexpectedly dismissed from his mind, however, by the announcement with which Maisie greeted her sister and himself, on their return from St. Malo.

The *pension* was a creeper-covered house, enclosed by brick walls, in a garden. The girl stood in the porch, apparently waiting for them. Her cheeks were charmingly flushed, and her eyes shone with gentle excitement. "Cissy," she cried, directly they appeared. "What do you think? Who should you imagine arrived this afternoon?"

"I shan't try," said Cecilia, sinking on to a garden seat. "It's hot."

Hawe smiled. "A friend of yours?" he said to the girl.

She nodded brightly.

"Oh," she added, "of course—you know him too. It's Dr. Brassy. He's taken a little holiday, and run over here. He travelled all last night."

"Really?" said Hawe, in a tone that was rather reserved.

He entered the house, surprised at his own sensation of annoyance.

CHAPTER II.

A FEW days later, Hawe realised frankly, and with continued self-wonderment, that he was suffering from acute jealousy.

Having eaten his little breakfast of coffee and rolls, he lay flat on his back in bed and smoked a cigarette. With him the custom was not usual. He indulged it now because he felt entirely disorganised, and in the mood to seek relaxation from thought, in any gratification of an uncommon inclination. The relaxation did not come. Instead, fresh recollections of occasions on which Maisie and Brassy had appeared deliberately to seek each other's company crowded on his mind. Each moment that passed increased his desire for the girl, and the odium in which he held the man.

Hawe imagined that he understood how the individual who eventually, from extreme jealousy, becomes a homicidal maniac, must originally feel. He lay and puffed at his cigarette, and thought that, if he could but quarrel with the doctor, there would be an immense satisfaction in doing murder. He would strangle the brute. Mere reflections of the method brought a vague comfort. At the same time, it demanded from his reason some excuse.

Brassy wore an open collar that showed his neck, and an Adam's apple—a view that Hawe found offensive. Brassy was more slug-like than any human being that Hawe remembered ever to have seen. His slimy, unctuous manners, the loathsome harmless necessity of all he did or said, his fool face. Hawe enumerated the qualities of his enemy with growing fury.

And all the time, he was well aware that he brought non-existent causes to explain his hatred, and that the fault lay in his own heart, in the undeniable fact of his own suspicious fear.

Did Maisie care, or was her studied attention to Brassy's every word, mere coquetry?

What had possessed himself (Hawe) not to have made sure of the all-important question of her affection, before the doctor's arrival?

"Heavens!" muttered Hawe, "how damnable it is to be in love!"

Of his own state there was no longer in his mind any doubt. He was convinced that he had never for one moment ceased to care for the girl, from the moment of their first meeting.

Now he dropped the stump of his cigarette into the breakfast cup, stretched his arms above his head, and ran through a few opprobrious epithets, intended for his rival.

Having thus eased his imagination, he returned to a consideration of the supreme injury for which Brassy was responsible.

"That he should know a bit too much about me—there's what's the devil," said Hawe, and, with murmured curses, swung himself out of bed.

While shaving he cut himself twice, and remained in a bad temper for the whole day.

Towards him, Brassy entertained a manner particularly and hideously irritating, inasmuch as it was distinctly suggestive of a friend who has enjoyed important confidences. Soon after his arrival, he asked Hawe whether "the knee was quite recovered?"

"The knee," said Sidney blankly. "Whose?"

"My dear sir, your own. I hope you have quite got over the injury?"

The Courtfields were present.

"Thanks," said Hawe. "I have no recollection of injuring my knee. If you refer to the inflammation that affected it, that is at present quite well."

"My mistake, of course," said Brassy, and smiled with inimitable slyness.

"So you suffered no ill effects from having neglected that bullet wound in your knee?" he persisted, a few hours later, as they sat alone.

"No, thanks."

Hawe's tone was dangerously polite.

"Yet in its way it was a nasty injury. It must have caused you some pain and inconvenience?"

No reply.

"I confess," continued Brassy meditatively, "that the case aroused my curiosity."

Silence.

"How did it happen? I should be most interested to know."

"Very likely," said Hawe; "but if you ask any more questions I shall be rude. And I'm hanged if I'll stand your beastly curiosity, anyway. Beg pardon, do you know when it will be high tide for bathing?"

Hawe longed to escape, but felt an inability to leave Maisie, or to cease from torturing himself by remarking her intimacy with Brassy, and speculating as to the reason.

The doctor stayed a week. During this seemingly interminable period, Hawe scraped an acquaintanceship with the grass-widow and deliberately took her twice to the St. Malo Casino, on occasions when he knew that Maisie and Cecilia, accompanied by Brassy and Monsieur Limarde, had elected to go to the same place.

While they patronised the performances of *opéras comiques* in the theatre, Hawe remained with the lady of doubtful reputation in the Salle des Jeux, and succeeded in losing a hundred francs and increasing his sense of jealous misery. He could not find the grass-widow amusing, but he made a point of paying her savage compliments whenever Maisie was within ear-shot. The girl's behaviour was admirably cool. On a particular evening, when the two parties had drifted severally to the Casino, and Hawe had flourished his new attachment more insistently than ever beneath the noses of the Courtfields, he realised that Maisie, looking divine in white muslin, was sitting with Brassy on the *terrasse* that overlooks the harbour. Monsieur Limarde and Cecilia were already within the theatre, listening to

"Mignon." The younger Miss Courtfield apparently preferred the doctor's conversation to Thomas' music. They sat at a little table on which stood tumblers of iced orangeade and beer. Beer! Brassy could drink beer while he talked to the only girl in the world! Maisie appeared absorbed, while she imbibed orangeade through a straw. Hawe, regarding them through a window of the Salle des Jeux, raged inwardly. Then he suggested to the grass-widow to "come and refresh." They took seats at the next table to that in which Sidney was interested, and drank American cocktails. Hawe subsequently proceeded to behave in a manner peculiarly young. He leant across the table towards his companion, and told her in clear tones that she was "simply ripping, by Jove!"

From the corner of his eye, he noted that Maisie's attention was immediately arrested.

The grass-widow laughed, and said: "Mon cher! Do you really think so?"

"Of course," said Hawe. "You must know—just what I feel. Why have you got a husband? Charming women should never marry, or else they should keep a male harem!"

"An attractive idea," she said; "and then one could have one's pet little husband. How *chic*!"

"Might I belong to you?" he asked.

"Oh!" she said, "you may do that now if you like."

"Thanks, a thousand times. I will be your slave. Madame can command. Another drink? Good. By the way, what's your name? May I call you by it? Mine? Oh, Johnnie. Yes? will you? I quite agree; convention's absurd."

Chairs were suddenly pushed back from the neighbouring table. Hawe lifted his head to observe Maisie's retreating form. At the same moment he felt an unholy exultation and a sense of intolerable flatness. He would have liked simultaneously to kick himself and pat himself on the back.

In this unhappy state of mind, he existed for the

whole duration of Brassy's visit, and noted with satisfactory self-pity that he had grown pale.

A man whom jealousy puts out of conceit with himself is always more markedly egotistical than he in whose person complacency is unruffled. Hawe, aware that his manners had grown morose and his expression set, consulted a mirror as many times a day as a woman troubled with a bad complexion.

Vanity, when injured, is apt to increase tenfold.

Then Brassy went away.

Hawe was immediately in the position of a terrier who, having sinned, desires, yet dreads, to come to heel. He felt entirely absurd. And he was perfectly conscious that Maisie found the situation amusing. For twenty-four hours they avoided each other. Hawe formed a new theory: that if there exists a hell, it must be a place where, while eternally making a fool of himself before an audience whose opinion he values, a man can never become hardened to his position.

That evening, as he sat at dinner opposite Maisie at the long *table d'hôte*, he became aware that she was regarding him intently with a little smile in her eyes. Their gaze suddenly met. The smile held a world of meaning—forgiveness, invitation, and but the faintest glimmer of suppressed amusement.

Maisie wore a white muslin dress, and a hat in which she appeared extraordinarily childish.

"Are you going to the Casino?" said Hawe abruptly.

"Yes; are you?"

He paused a moment, flushed, then—"May I?" he said.

"With us?" said Maisie, the smile increasing. "Of course. Cecilia and I are going with Monsieur Limarde. If you come, we shall be four. That'll be nice."

Cecilia sat next to Maisie. "Yes, come along," she said. "They're playing 'Manon' at the theatre to-night. We mean to get seats at the door. I hope there'll be four together."

"Is it 'Manon' to-night?" asked the grass-widow,

who sat next to Hawe. "Oh, you'll like that. Have you ever heard it?"

"No," said Maisie. "Is it pretty? What's the story?"

The grass-widow laughed and glanced at Hawe, who remained oblivious. "Oh, c'la ne se dit pas," she replied, "but it's extremely chic, and so sad. I always howl."

Monsieur Limarde joined in the conversation.

"Manon," he said meditatively; "Ah, there is a story that gives one for to think. Me—I find it quite strange, not to be onderstood. That a man should so much be in lof." He turned to Maisie. "That is the story, mademoiselle, of un pauvre bête d'homme, who lofed—what you say—not wisely, but too well. You understan', hein?" He glanced from Maisie to Hawe with inimitable wickedness, and continued, "But then, this chevalier, this Desgrieux, he do not lof a jeune fille—modeste—like mademoiselle, he lof a cocotte."

Hawe coughed.

Cecilia looked fierce.

The grass-widow giggled.

Maisie said "Oh?" in a tone slightly interrogative and wholly innocent.

"A cocotte," continued Limarde, his expression entirely Gallic, his tone pleasant and eager to convey information. "One says it is great mystery—the story—for ce chevalier, he only want to marry her, and then he stay in lof always. And the music—very fine. The scène de la séduction—that is what you will enjoy."

"Then you have seen it, mossure?" said Cecilia.

"Yes, indeed,"

"Of course, it's very fine," said the grass-widow aside to Hawe, "but if you ask me, scarcely suitable for la jeune fille. But then, of course, most operas are like that, aren't they? Look at "Tannhäuser." And I quite think that music is the most immoral of the arts, don't you?"

"What do you mean?" said Hawe, his attention momentarily arrested.

"In its influence, don't you know—so passionate and so human. When you listen to Wagner, you want to go off and do something wicked. Don't you? Well, I do. That overture, don't you know? Tum, tum-tum. Oh! c'est magnifique! And, morally, the worst thing, in its effect, to which I've ever listened."

"I didn't know you were so keen on morals," said Hawe.

She laughed. "Mon cher, I'm not. Surely I told you, I like the effect. So chic, don't you know?"

"Mr. Hawe," said Maisie rather warningly, "we think of starting in another half-hour."

They went to the Casino.

Hawe began to feel that Brassy was a nightmare, whose existence he might now forget.

The Courtfields chose, from motives of economy, to take the steam-tram from St. Servan to St. Malo.

Hawe sat next to Maisie and felt as the elect will probably feel on the Judgment Day: a passive holy joy, and a sense of entire self-satisfaction. He succeeded in manœuvring to sit near her again at the theatre. He thrilled to feel the contact of her muslin sleeve against his arm, the sweep of her skirt against his foot.

During the first act of the opera, he was but dimly conscious of the staging. The tender, delicate music impressed itself on his mind, and at each repetition of the passionate "*Manon*" *motif* his pulses throbbed and his thoughts took shape. "I love her—I love her."

Maisie, as usual, appeared absorbed in the action of the piece. Occasionally she turned towards him a bewildered face. "What was that?" she would whisper. "What did she say?"

During the *entr'acte*, she wanted him to explain. In disclosing what he knew of the story of "*Manon Lescaut*," Hawe felt vagueness to be the better part of revelation.

They drifted with the crowd to the Salle des Jeux.

"Have you ever played?" said Hawe.

"No," said Maisie; "I don't think I should like it."

They lingered, however, to watch the gamblers.

"Give me a number," said Hawe, "and I'll put on five francs."

Maisie touched him on the arm. "Oh, no," she said; "please don't. I—I would much rather you didn't gamble."

He replaced the coin that he had taken from his pocket, and looked down on her pretty earnest face.

"What a good little girl you are," he said softly.

They returned to the theatre for the second act, which Maisie found rather more mystifying than the first.

They went out on to the *terrasse* and had drinks.

Limarde was eager to explain details of the story of the opera, and required some squashing.

Suddenly Fritton, the author, passed in company with an exceptionally well-gowned woman, whose skirts of lace and chiffon trailed behind her for several yards, and whose well-poised head, surmounted by a gigantic hat, moved from side to side in a manner suggestive of a bird in search of worms.

Catching sight of Limarde, she bowed and smiled, disclosing perfect teeth between reddened lips. "Why, there's Moosure Fritton," said Maisie, leaning forward and bowing. "What a pretty girl with him! Who is she?"

"Aren't people beginning to go back to the theatre?" interposed Hawe, quickly.

"Don't let's hurry," said Maisie. "Who was that well-dressed woman, Moosure Limarde? Someone well known?"

"Oh—a—yes—she is well known," answered Limarde; "mais oui, vraiment. That is her—what you say—vocation—to be well known. C'est une de ces dames, voyez vous?"

The girl laughed.

"No—I don't voyez. I wish you wouldn't talk French, when you know you can talk English beautifully, moosure . . . Oh, all right, Mr. Hawe—if you're in such a hurry to get back to the piece!"

Sidney had already risen from the table. They returned to the garden scene of "Manon."

"On n'a pas toujours vingt ans," sang the soprano.

Hawe felt elderly.

Who was he, to think of linking his life with that of a pure young girl? In his thoughts, he likened Maisie to a flower spotlessly white that he longed yet hesitated to pick, knowing that his hands were soiled.

In evolving this simile, he imagined himself original.

He told himself that her fair chastity was a thing to be set in a shrine and worshipped, but found the very idea of indulging only a respectful and distant devotion unaccountably depressing.

The end of the third act found him silent and restless. The fourth act altered his mood.

Once more his pulses throbbed to the music, and the excitement of the scene in which Manon tempts her lover from his priestly vows, caused his blood to leap.

On the stage, the struggle between impulse and self-control was finely portrayed. Hawe experienced a reflection of the same strife. He sat leaning forward in his chair, tense with interest in the situation. For the moment he was Desgrieux. Only in his own case, a sense of supreme unworthiness, instead of self-respect, deterred his inclination. How would the psychological battle result? Manon, type of the eternal feminine, clung to the man—besought him to listen—to look—practised every art to win him.

“N'est-ce plus ma main. . . .”

“N'est-ce plus ma voix . . .”

“Ah! regardez moi! Ah! regardez moi.”

The very atmosphere thrilled to the seduction of the voice.

Would he turn, and look, and be lost?

Futile question! Only for a moment staying resolute, as one tortured, then he wavered—yielded—and was overcome.

“Oui—c'est ta voix!”

“Oui—c'est—Manon!”

The wonderful duet; the embrace of man and woman; the complete triumph of passion; the falling of the curtain.

Hawe felt a mist before his eyes. He rose abruptly,

while the rest of the audience remained seated. In his ears, the tumult of the applause sounded like a storm. He turned to Maisie.

"Let's get out," he said, "before the rush. Hot, isn't it?"

He piloted her through the crowd into the vestibule, between the theatre and the Salle des Jeux, and before she realised his intention opened a swinging door on the right, and passed into a glass-covered corridor, that leads out on to the west entrance of the Casino.

"Do you mind?" he said. "It'll be cool. Supposing we go outside?"

Maisie agreed.

They passed through a door, and down a flight of steps to the road, crossed it, and stood on the sea-wall.

The tide was high. Beneath them the water caressed the barrier of stone. From space, a thousand thousand worlds looked down.

The place was deserted.

Maisie leant her elbow on the wall, and looked across the sea.

"Oh, this is nice," she said. "But what'll Cecilia be saying? How mad of us to come!"

He stood close beside her.

"Mad?" he said. "Of course. I'm clean off my head. Did you know—I love you—I love you!"

He suddenly snatched her towards him and kissed her.

Maisie gasped.

He gave a little short laugh, and held her tighter. Then, with his face bent over hers, he continued speaking, in a tone curiously quiet—almost incisive. "I love you. I want you. D'you see? Since the day I first saw you, it's been so. You must marry me! I love you!"

Maisie smiled up at him.

"You're awfully positive," she said. "I suppose you don't want an answer. In the meanwhile, you might let me go."

He only held her closer, seeming to put forth some of his strength. He laughed again.

"You don't mean that. I believe you care. You care a little, don't you? Oh, Maisie—darling—darling!"

"You're suffocating me," she said.

"I don't mind. Yes I do. What a brute I am!"

He loosened his hold, but still clasped her hands and kissed them.

"Dear me!" said Maisie. "When you're quite done——"

"D'you love me?"

"Really—I don't quite know——"

"You must! Say——"

"Well—yes—I suppose so——"

"You suppose so!" He laid his hand on her shoulder and gave her a little shake.

"You're horrid," she said pettishly, but with a slight chuckle. "Well, then: yes—I do."

"Say it!"

"What?"

"Say—'I love you!'"

"I've said it!"

"And you didn't care for him—that beast?"

"Who—Brassy? Oh, Sid, you were so funny!"

"I wasn't. You'd torture a fellow to death, and find humour in his last struggles. Darling—dearest in all the world—you really care a little? When'll we be married?"

"Oh, Sid, I don't know. We can't. You forget. It isn't six months since Jim——"

There was a pause.

Then—"Did you love him?" said Hawe.

"Who—Jim? Yes, in a way. I think I was younger, you know. He was very fond of me."

"So am I. Maisie, Maisie—I've been a brute in a thousand ways. I've not lived straight. D'you love me?"

"Silly!" said Maisie. "Of course! How many more times of asking?"

CHAPTER III.

NEXT morning, Hawe sat in the *pension* garden to smoke and meditate. Having slightly recovered from the preliminary excitement of first entering Paradise, he was now in the mood to survey his surroundings. Chiefly it struck him as an abode of perfect peace, wherein there was no place for a particular species of human slug. It pleased Hawe inexpressibly to imagine Brassy left in outer darkness. Still more delightful was it to conjure up a mental picture of himself treading underfoot and destroying the worm, at the moment when he was admitted to Maisie's affections.

So may the first man have pondered in the Garden, while Satan, unsquashed, hid behind a tree and winked an eye.

Hawe was completely happy. A sense of entire self-satisfaction is the principle of bliss.

He had shaved with enormous care, and knew that his face was no longer unbecomingly sallow.

He thought he recognised which was Maisie's bedroom window, and accordingly thereon fixed his gaze. He received, however, a distinct shock, when a tousled and bearded head (which he recognised as that of the methodist minister) appeared above a pyjama suit, in the open framework.

"Good morning—nice day," said the clergyman, looking out on to the garden.

"Very," growled Hawe.

It is always annoying to waste sentiment, by projecting it in a mistaken direction.

Suddenly Cecilia appeared from the house, and advanced towards Hawe. The methodist minister retreated in haste from the window.

"Good morning," said Miss Courtfield.

"You're down early," said Hawe.

"So are you," she returned smiling.

Then she sat down, and regarded him intently with her honest eyes.

"Maisie has told me," she said. "I'm glad."

"Thanks," he said, rather boyishly. "Thanks awfully. By Jove! I think I'm the luckiest chap in the world."

After a little silence, Cecilia answered, "So do I." Her tone was, as usual, brusque. She waited, then continued, as though with an effort. "You see—there's such a difference in our ages—hers and mine—that I feel rather like—her mother. So I value her high—you understand?"

"Yes," said Hawe.

He looked at her, and noted that her eyes held a look inexpressibly pathetic. "Of course," he added, rather nervously, as she did not at once speak. Her gaze was still bent on him.

"I think you're a good sort," she continued. "I've liked you from the first, and I think I guessed that this might happen. In a way, it seems strange—so soon. . . . But after all, I suppose that was only a boy-and-girl affair. Somehow, she seems older now."

"She suggested," said Hawe, slowly, "that we should wait."

"Yes, I know. To tell you the truth," said Cecilia, "I hardly understand her mood. The child is so nervous and high-strung—you know—I've told you. Well, I suppose she must have felt the shock more than we imagined. She asked me to tell you something—do you mind?"

"No—what is it?"

"She wants you to forget last night."

Hawe sat perfectly still.

"That's impossible," he said quietly.

"I know," said Cecilia. "I must explain. It's like this. Please try to understand. I'm sure she cares, but, in caring, she feels disloyal to his memory, Remember, it was a very little while ago."

"But, if she cares——" said Hawe. His tone was almost impatient.

"Don't you see?" said Cecilia. "She must accustom herself to the idea. . . . It's only a question of waiting for a little while. I think you should allow her time."

Hawe crossed his arms with rather a fierce movement, and stared straight before him.

"It's hard, a bit," he said incisively. "And I'm afraid I'm dense. I don't quite catch on. You mean we're not to be engaged, because she wants first to think over what it'll feel like. She must have known I cared, all this time; and last night, anyway, she said, 'Yes.' As to growing accustomed, I'd have thought that she could do that while we're engaged."

Cecilia clasped and unclasped her hands weakly.

"Can't you try to put yourself in her place?" she said.

"No," said Hawe, with a short laugh, "I'm afraid I can't. I don't see what she wants. It isn't possible to forget last night, or to return to the level of mere friendship. Either we're engaged, or else we're not, and I'll go away."

His tone had gained in annoyance.

"I think you're unreasonable," said Cecilia, as one who states a fact.

Hawe shrugged his shoulders and bit his lip.

After a moment, "Perhaps it would be easier to come to some conclusion with your sister herself," he observed formally. "I suppose she will at least talk the matter over with me?"

"Yes," said Cecilia. "She shall do that. I will tell her to come out to you." As she spoke, she rose from the seat, and stood for a moment with her hand to her head, as though in thought.

"D'you know," she added, suddenly, without looking at the man, "d'you know, I would like her to become your wife."

Hawe felt somewhat taken back. He also rose, and stood looking at the woman.

Abruptly Cecilia turned towards him, laid her hand on his arm, and gazed up into his face.

"You'll be good to my little girl?" she said.

Her strong voice had grown slightly tremulous, and there were tears in her eyes.

Hawe's colour deepened. He cleared his throat, smiled, and laid over hers his left hand.

"Don't you see?" he said. "I love her better than anything. It isn't a question of being good to her."

"Yes it is," said Cecilia, argumentatively. "You may want her, but you must care enough to do without her."

Hawe's smile grew broader.

"If that's what she wants," he said, in a tone of assurance, "she's only got to give the word, and I'll clear. Now, please, may I see her—and know?"

She left him, and strolling up and down the garden path he pondered, in some perplexity, the ways of women. After some minutes of pacing to and fro, he heard behind him a step, and turned to behold Maisie.

She stood in the path, hesitating to advance, appearing half shy, half filled with brave resolve, and to Hawe wholly desirable. She wore a simple cotton dress, and, in the front of her bodice, she had pinned a fresh red carnation. In one hand she clutched a little handkerchief, which she twisted nervously between her fingers.

The next moment he had advanced and seized both her palms between his own.

"Oh, Maisie, Maisie, Maisie!"

"No, you really mustn't kiss me," she said in a flurry, as he bent his head above her. "Don't, dear boy; please don't, with all the people in the *pension* looking on out of their bedroom windows."

For answer he laughed, put his arm through her own, and forcibly ran her down to the bottom of the garden, where shady trees hid them from the house.

"Now," he said, and embraced her violently, then stood away from her with shining eyes.

"Good morning," he observed coolly. "I've been

told you don't want to be engaged to me. Have the goodness to explain."

She made a little face at him and laughed.

"Dearest girl in the world, what's all this nonsense you've been talking to Cecilia?"

"Well, didn't she tell you?"

"There was some long rigmarole. She was sure you cared—yet you didn't care—and it was suggested that I should be kept on, like a beetle with a pin through my body, without knowing what was to be my ultimate fate."

"Sidney!"

"Say it again."

"Shan't!—but don't you think that's best? I mean——"

"Yes, I daresay. For you, it would be quite interesting to watch the struggles of the beetle; for the insect it wouldn't be quite as amusing. Don't be silly. We're engaged—or not."

The smile faded from Maisie's face.

"You're horrid."

Hawe laughed.

"I know. You said that before. In the same breath you said you cared. You see, I haven't forgotten, and I don't intend to. D'you want to chuck me?"

"No," she said rather petulantly, "of course not—at least——"

"Well?"

"Oh, I don't know," she said.

Her lips quivered childishly. She flung away from him. "Perhaps, then, if you're not keen, it had better be off," she threw at him over her shoulder.

He gave a great shout of laughter, and from behind put his arms round her neck and his face near her cheek.

"Keen!" he said. "*Keen!* Good Lord! You're talking Dutch."

"Don't do that!" she said, and wriggled.

He took a backward step and deliberately put his hands in his pockets. Then he stood regarding her, with puzzled eyes and a little half-quizzical smile.

"I'm sorry, dear," he said. "I'm afraid I'm an awful boor. I haven't had much to do with women, so I'm stupid—see? Only—we seem at present to be playing a sort of game, of which I don't know the rules. And I don't specially want to learn them, anyway. Seems to me rather a fool business." He paused, and some of the colour suddenly faded from his face, but he did not move.

"Say," he added gently, "are you only just flirting? Because—I'm not."

Maisie gave him a little sly glance. The corner of her mouth lifted. Her head dropped slightly to one side. But to Hawe's query she gave no answer.

"Say," he repeated.

"If you think me a flirt——" said Maisie, assuming injured dignity, above a ripple of mirth.

Hawe did not smile.

"Is the situation funny?" he said,

"Yes," said she with a giggle; "very."

He raised his eyebrows and stood once more regarding her, with firmly compressed lips.

"See here," he said; "we'll try to imagine for a moment that it's a serious matter. Of course, I know it's nothing much—it only affects our lives. As a matter of fact, it hasn't anything to do with whether you're looking pretty this morning, or whether I'm making an ass of myself; or so it seems to me. Do you think you could take that point of view for a minute?"

She met his gaze with rather a startled expression in her eyes.

"Last night," he continued in the same incisive tones, "I asked you to be my wife. You said 'Yes.' I took that as a promise. Was I wrong?"

"No—o," said Maisie.

The stern expression dropped from his face like a mask. He held out his hand. "Then we are engaged to be married? I have your permission to kiss my affianced wife?"

Maisie blushed and dimpled.

"You've done that already," she said.

He caught his breath sharply, then let himself go. . . .

Later in the morning Hawe mentioned something fatuous about a ring.

"Oh, no," said Maisie, "you mustn't."

"I mustn't give you a ring? Why not?"

She hesitated, and the colour came and went in her cheeks.

"Please," she said tremulously, "not yet. That was all I meant just now. Don't you see, only a few little months ago I was wearing one that Jim had given me. It wasn't a very nice one—only turquoises set right into the gold—gipsy rings, don't they call them? Still, it would seem a shame to accept another from you so soon."

"Dearest," said Hawe. "How loyal you are! All right. But, Maisie—it *was* a mistake; you never really cared for him, did you?"

"I didn't understand love then," she whispered.

"But, Sid—you see what I mean, don't you? To myself, I'd rather not call this an engagement. I should feel so fickle. I prefer to regard it as an understanding, and to consider that we aren't actually bound to one another."

Hawe made a grimace.

"You'll excuse me from taking that point of view," he said. "I consider that we *are* bound to one another, anyway. And I'm afraid I can't see the difference between an engagement and an understanding. Both are backed by a promise."

The girl flushed crimson.

"Silly," she said. "Well, I'm not going to begin the argument all over again. Only—there is a difference. Except Cecilia, I don't want anyone to know about it. People would think me horrid."

"D'you care so much for what people think?" asked he, man-like.

"One has to," she said, with a little sigh.

He asked for and received the gift of one of her bangles—a slim gold curb, that she was accustomed to

wear. She fastened it over his wrist, and to hide it he pulled down his shirt-cuff. To replace the bracelet, he insisted on presenting her with another of far finer workmanship.

The days passed.

Cecilia appeared to have accepted the fact of the engagement with puzzling placidity. Outwardly, she was neither depressed nor elated by the situation.

Her manner towards Hawe never for a moment lost the brusque frankness, that had from the first been its chief characteristic.

In return, he treated her as though she actually held the position of guardian to the girl, and insisted one day upon explaining to her the satisfactory state of his means.

He told Miss Courtfield, besides, that if she wished it he would only return to British Columbia to sell his ranch, and would be content to settle in England and find other occupation, among surroundings that might be more suited to the tastes of his future wife.

"No," said Cecilia; "I wouldn't do that if I were you. It's a mistake to start new work at your age. Also, it seems to me that you're more suited to live out West. If Maisie accepts you, she accepts the ranch as well."

"You think so?" said Hawe eagerly. "You really think so?"

It flashed through his mind that he would have found the course he had proposed utterly repugnant. To rule his existence by the hateful restrictions of English convention, to leave behind him the wide, free life of the prairies, and (because he felt the indispensability of occupation) to train his mind to some new office business, or the management of some new home farm: these considerations caused him involuntarily to shudder and, in the same moment, to bless Cecilia for her opinion.

"But," he added meditatively, "I don't know how Maisie will like it. It's a rough life for a woman."

Miss Courtfield stared before her, as though to look into the future. When she spoke, her tone was

vague, and conveyed the impression that she was careless of the importance of the question.

"If you become man and wife, I suppose she will accustom herself to your ways."

Hawe laughed with a shade of annoyance.

"I don't altogether want that. You speak as though I suggested she should have no will of her own. I only want her to be happy in her surroundings, as in everything else."

Cecilia shrugged her shoulders almost impatiently.

"You'd better talk it over with Maisie herself. You believe that she knows her own mind, don't you? If she's willing to marry you, I don't see why she shouldn't be content to live with you in any corner of the globe, however remote."

Hawe stared.

"What do you mean?" he said.

"Oh," said Cecilia acidly, "I suppose you can judge for yourself whether she cares for you or not."

"Certainly I can," he returned sharply, "though, from your tone, you would seem to infer otherwise."

"I don't want to infer anything," said Cecilia, blinking her light-hazel eyes at him in a peculiarly irritating manner. "In the meanwhile, don't you think it's a nicer afternoon for sitting out of doors and making love, than for remaining within and arguing?"

(The interview had taken place in the *pension* drawing-room. Through the open window, Maisie was visible strolling in the garden.)

Hawe shrugged his shoulders.

"I'm sorry to have troubled you," he said. "And—yes—thanks for your advice. I will go out of doors."

He went towards the window which opened to the ground. Before he stepped out on to the gravel, he turned and regarded Cecilia, who sat where he had left her, in an attitude curiously still and suggestive of humiliation.

"I fail to understand," he said, with a somewhat ugly sneer, "why you should presuppose that I am not in earnest."

She did not meet his gaze.

"I don't," she replied, in a level and almost emphatic voice.

"Anyway," he added, "you appear to think that this discussion has scarcely been worth while."

Cecilia suddenly leaned forward and spoke in a low tone.

"You're sure you care—seriously?"

Hawe flushed and threw back his head.

"I'm not a boy," he said.

She gave a little laugh, in which any other woman would have expressed irony. From Cecilia it sounded only rather foolish.

"I know," she said. "It's a pity. I wish you were younger—nearer Maisie's age—d'you see?"

His only answer was a muttered exclamation, as he retreated through the window.

Miss Courtfield seemed to him the most unreasonable of women.

Later on the same day, he spoke of the ranch to Maisie.

"It sounds lovely," she said. "To live in British Columbia—why, yes, of course, that would be delightful. It must be the sweetest place."

"It's a bit rough, Maisie, but glorious! You really wouldn't mind?"

"Of course not. But let's talk now of something more amusing. Have you any other names besides Sidney? No? Well, I like that. You don't mind my shortening it—calling you Sid, do you?"

CHAPTER IV.

THE summer seemed made for love. August passed in a round of blazing days, which for the most part were spent by Hawe and Maisie in boating expeditions on the Rance, an arm of the sea which forms between Dinard and St. Servan a mile-wide channel, and then cuts inland, riverlike and winding. Sidney hired for the month a sailing boat, which, with the aid of its owner, a Breton fisherman, he delighted to navigate between the high wooded banks of the estuary, with Maisie at his side. Well provisioned for an *al fresco* breakfast or tea, they would often disembark and picnic on land.

Cecilia generally remained behind, but would sometimes accompany them. Maisie insisted, as well, upon occasionally asking some of their acquaintances, among the visitors at the *pension*, to join their party. Monsieur Limarde, the grass-widow, and even some members of the methodist minister's family figured more than once, to Hawe's ill-concealed annoyance, in these excursions.

In the meanwhile, despite any opposing arguments that he could bring, Maisie held to her point, that their engagement should be regarded as a secret understanding, and that the time had not yet arrived when, without self-blame, she might consent to wear on her finger any emblem of their troth.

Hawe failed to comprehend the view she took of their existing relations, more especially as he conjectured that among their *pension* acquaintances the fact that the pair were affianced must be generally guessed. The girl's desire for secrecy set her lover in an equivocal position, and the consciousness of appearing ever so slightly ridiculous caused him a not unreasonable discontent. He was, therefore, unable to taste the

perfection of happiness except in anticipation — an impression of future joys which few men appreciate at its true worth.

Maisie, to Hawe's extreme bewilderment, fixed a date for the discontinuance of their "understanding," and the commencement of their engagement. "In October," she said, "you may give me a ring. Yes, thank you, Sid, I think diamonds would be very nice."

At the beginning of September they left St. Servan to return to London.

Cecilia resumed her work. Maisie complained that it was hateful to be forced to spend in town a month that was still summer.

Hawe had received some invitations to shoot in Scotland, and only intended to spend a few days in London, before journeying north. For this period he sought the company of his *fiancée* with persistent regularity every afternoon, and impressed upon her his unwillingness to be parted from her for even a few weeks, and his opinion that in point of attraction she was far better worth obtaining than the finest grouse that ever flew, or the noblest head of game that was ever stalked by a sportsman.

"I should think so, indeed," she said, with something of a snort. "I should hope I was worth more than any amount of silly birds. And I shall be so bored while you're away, Sid. I wish you wouldn't go."

It was necessary for him to explain (with some prevarication) that he had found it quite impossible, without giving offence, to refuse the invitations he had received.

London was more or less deserted. On a bright afternoon (his last day in town), as Hawe, with hair freshly cropped, emerged from Truefitt's shop in Bond Street, he received a distinct surprise in meeting no less a person than Pia Hamlyn. At a little distance he perceived her walking towards him, from the direction of Piccadilly. On seeing him she stopped, disregarded his outstretched hand, and flushed suddenly crimson. Her changing colour brought back to his mind a clear

remembrance of their last interview. He experienced an immediate sense of pity and the wish to set her at her ease. He smiled pleasantly.

"Hullo!" he said. "Fancy meeting you. This is nice. Where have you sprung from? You're not back in town, are you?"

She laughed and made rather a pitiful attempt to screw up her eyes at him in the old quizzical way.

"Palpably," she said. "It's really I, not my astral self. Excuse my shaking hands. Parcels—you see." She carried in one hand a small package, and with the other held her skirt.

"Yes," she continued, speaking faster than her wont and refusing to look at him, "as a matter of fact I'm just passing through. The house is shut up. I'm staying at an hotel, and going on to Scotland the day after to-morrow to spend a week with the Hoskins' and to put in a few other silly visits. I hate shooting parties, don't you? One's always expected to walk miles over horrid moors with the guns, and to take an interest in killing birds and beasts. I'm not sporting and I hate heather and I dread Scotch people. They're always so rude, aren't they? And when one isn't taking violent physical exercise, they expect one to sit indoors and play a pianola or billiards. So *banale*. Still, it's the proper thing, isn't it? And, meanwhile, I'm in a tearing hurry. I really must go on."

Hawe was somewhat taken aback by this flow of conversation, which, in its vagueness of object, reminded him irresistibly of the mode of speech employed by Lady Betty Hoskins. Further, Pia's intention to talk nonsense was evident, and her mode aroused his curiosity.

"Which way are you going?" he asked. "Towards Oxford Street? All right. So am I. Let's walk together."

She continued her way, and he stepped by her side.

She gave a little laugh.

"Oh, as you like. What are you doing in town? Isn't it empty?—a perfect wilderness. I'm dying to get away."

Hawe noted the palpable contradiction of her former statement, and the almost hysterical sharpness of her tone. He glanced at her wonderingly, and observed with fresh surprise that once more her face was thickly rouged and powdered. The flush had faded from her skin, leaving apparent an unnatural dab of colour on either cheek. Her eyes were blackened, and her lips were of an impossible crimson. On her head she wore an emphatically *outré* hat of red chiffon.

It occurred to him suddenly that she appeared distinctly bad style; the question flashed through his mind as to whether her taste, which he had hitherto considered perfect, had suffered a degeneration, or whether from the first his own judgment had been at fault. As he regarded her, he answered her last remark. "Like you, I'm only in town for a few days. I start north to-morrow. Did you say you were going to the Hoskins? They've asked me to shoot as well, so we shall meet. That'll be jolly!"

He thought that she started very slightly.

Immediately afterwards: "Oh, have they?" she said nonchalantly. "Yes; they don't have bad house parties. Mostly men—and little boys. I believe the shooting's quite exciting for the keepers and dogs. Betty and I keep away from it, but sometimes take out lunch. How one over-eats oneself on those occasions, doesn't one? I've got so fat this summer, with picnics and so on. And I've worn out all my clothes: simply had to stop in London to get some more. Where have you been—Oh, there's not a bad frock."

She paused at a shop window, where dresses were displayed, studied for a moment her reflection in the plate-glass, and, after a touch to her hat, once more moved forward. She continued to talk in hurried nervous tones, that differed entirely from her usual lazy enunciation. "What a lovely August it's been, hasn't it? I spent a week, just lately, with the Wilberforces, in Devonshire. What a pretty place they've got, haven't they? And it seems so wasted. You

know, they're perfectly mad. I hope they aren't friends of yours. It's a fact. They say she's got a brother in an asylum, and I'm sure I'm not surprised. They've married their cousins for generations. Such a mistake, isn't it? One begins to believe in heredity. And we simply lived on Devonshire cream. But, wherever have you been all this time? You see that picture shop? Zingara had the first floor above it, during the season—the crystal-gazer, you know. She was splendid. Didn't you ever consult her? And so cheap—only a guinea. Really, though, hasn't August been delicious!—so different to last year?"

As this rambling discourse for a moment ceased, Hawe seized the opportunity to speak.

"Yes, it's been ripping. I've spent my time in Brittany—at a little place near St. Malo."

"St. Malo?" she said. "That's the place opposite New-haven, isn't it? In the Pas de Calais and by the seaside? And all French watering places smell. How hateful!"

"On the contrary," said Hawe, laughing, "it was very nice. I wasn't staying in the town."

"Why not? And is there a casino? I love roulette, don't you? Someone told me a system the other day. You go on the same number twelve times out of every ten revolutions, or something like that. It never fails. I shall run down to Monte next winter and try it."

Hawe gave a little chuckle.

"I hope you will be successful," he said.

"Oh, I suppose you don't believe in systems. Men never do."

"I allow that the principle of the thing has never appealed to me," he returned.

She seemed to catch her breath sharply. Then—"Oh, principles," she murmured, with a short laugh, and stopped abruptly.

"What about principles?" said Hawe curiously, and watched a fresh wave of colour, which crept up from her neck until once more it suffused her face. He looked away, feeling personally uncomfortable.

"By Jove!" he said lightly, "of course. We once

had a discussion on the subject of principles, hadn't we? By the way, I've taken your advice. D'you remember my telling you the story of a not very creditable proceeding, in which I was once involved?" He finished with rather a nervous laugh.

"Did you?" said Pia. "I'm afraid I haven't the slightest recollection. Was it interesting? And what did I advise you?"

Hawe felt somewhat squashed.

"Oh! if you don't remember, perhaps that's just as well. Only, you recommended me not to tell anyone else. I've decided not to do so."

"Dear me! And so I'm the sole recipient of your confidence. How touching!" Her tone was flippant. "I adore to be told secrets, especially when they're scandalous. It's such a joy to divulge or keep them, according to one's own discretion."

A sense of growing annoyance, caused by her manner, invaded Hawe's mind.

"I should like to hope that you will keep mine," he said rather gravely. Pia gave so loud a laugh that a passer-by turned to regard her. "How can I do otherwise?" she said. "I told you I didn't remember it. Perhaps you would like to refresh my memory."

"Oh, no, thanks," said Hawe quickly; "there's no necessity."

"You suggest that I haven't after all forgotten?"

The idea had not previously occurred to him, but now it flashed across his mind. Her carelessness piqued him, and he welcomed the doubt.

"Well—yes," he said; "it does seem unlikely that you should have so soon done so. Of course, if you have, I'm glad. Complete forgetfulness is often most convenient."

She gave him a sidelong glance.

"I begin to have a dim recollection of what you told me. It was some story of your having swindled a friend, wasn't it? And some melodramatic episode. To tell you the truth, I thought you were inventing as you went along. I was a good deal entertained."

She spoke viciously.

Hawe grew angry.

"Of course, it was a joke," he said sharply.

Pia giggled. "So I imagined. It might have occurred to another woman that you gave her your confidence, in the desire for sympathy. I was more shrewd."

"As far as I remember, we both acted remarkably well," replied Hawe in a dangerously level voice.

"Did we? Ah! no doubt."

"You, in fact, were more than sympathetic."

As his own sense of self-importance suffered, he spoke with intention to wound.

Pia laughed again, with a slight gasp, and looked round, and up and down the street. For the first time, when she spoke again, her voice shook.

"You have quite a wonderful memory."

"Some incidents are hard to forget," he observed brutally. Immediately after utterance, he could have bitten out his tongue.

Pia for a moment stood still on the pavement, then advanced to the kerb. Her face had suddenly grown nearly purple. Her eyes were opened wide. Her nostrils quivered.

"A cab," she said in a choking voice. "I'm in such a hurry. I must take a cab."

An empty hansom passed, but she appeared not to see it. Hawe signalled to the driver, who immediately drew up to the gutter. Pia got in, disregarding Sidney's proffered assistance. He leant forward and spoke very gently.

"Where shall I tell him to go?"

Mrs. Hamlyn sat with hands clenched over one another in her lap.

"All right," she said steadily. "Thanks. Where? Oh, the Ladies' Field Club."

She gave a number in Albemarle Street, and Hawe repeated it to the cabman.

He stood back and lifted his hat. As the hansom moved away, he imagined he saw her put a hand over her face.

He continued his way feeling extraordinarily ashamed. It was futile to remind himself that the fault had lain with the woman. In any case he had behaved brutally in reminding her of her indiscretion. It was apparent that she cared. But, in this consideration, conceit could find no solace. In a moment of uncontrolled emotion she had revealed to him her feelings. As a man of honour it behoved him to put the recollection of that moment from his mind—to count it as though it had never been. He, after all, had been equally to blame. In the first instance, he had given her a confidence of immense significance, then he had invited her opinion, had allowed the conversation to become particularly intimate, had yielded unconditionally to the passion she evoked, had lost even more than she his self-control.

And now, in a moment of annoyance, he had referred to an incident which should for ever have been buried in oblivion. He guessed at the agony of self-blame which must have overtaken her—censure from which there was no escape, horror of the past humiliation, for which it must be impossible for her ever to find justification. His should have been the chivalrous instinct to shield her from further recollection. He cursed himself inwardly, would have given worlds to re-live the last half-hour, and tortured himself with conjectures as to what would happen when, unavoidably, they should meet again.

Out of sympathy with her and blame of himself grew, for the second time, an emotion tenderly and humbly sentimental. The question again arose, "Am I, after all, indifferent to her affection?"

The sense of his mad young fondness returned to him vividly. Wasn't there a French proverb—"On revient toujours à ses premières amours?" How devoted he had been! How he had cherished her photograph, torn across in a moment of jealous anger. He pulled himself up sharply. This was going too far.

He was engaged to Maisie—the dearest girl in the world. And he had had the intention to spend this

afternoon with the Courtfields. He at once summoned a cab and was driven to Rosemore Mansions.

The door of the flat was opened to him by another than Irene Spratt, a change which Hawe had observed with relief immediately on his return from Brittany.

It was apparent that the lady-help had not resumed service with the Courtfields. The aspect of the new maid-servant differed entirely from that of the last.

On former occasions, when his visits had necessitated frequent encounters with Irene, Hawe had suffered some embarrassment. Since their interview in Kensington Gardens, no words beyond the formalities of question and answer had passed between them, but the knowledge that an understanding existed was as a thorn in the man's side.

Whenever occasion brought them face to face he was troubled afresh by the consciousness, that beneath the woman's vacuous expression lurked a cunning intelligence, which she revealed to him alone in casual sidelong glances. He even began to watch her face—to note any hint of expression in the light-coloured prominent eyes. Often he imagined that they held a regard wickedly sly. Irene's tongue was silent, yet she seemed to say—"We're pards—you and I. Go'n, don't you try no gammon. Yah! Who pide me ten poun' for 'ush money? Call yerself a gentleman? I know yer!"

All this, while the lady-help might be announcing Mr. Hawe through the open sitting-room door.

And on the face of it, he told himself, such unspoken accusations were absurd. Irene's judgment was based on a mistaken impression given by a perusal of the foolish raving letter that Reesdale had written, when maddened by trouble.

While in a manner ashamed of the discreditable transaction for which he had been responsible, he considered frankly that he had not been entirely to blame. Further, he only desired to regard the whole affair as past and irrevocable. For his sin he had felt and, in a manner, shown repentance; now he saw no necessity for remorse.

This was his attitude.

Having regained possession of the letter, he had immediately destroyed it. At the same time, figuratively he had washed his hands, flattering himself that at least he was not guilty of the man's death.

In that consideration lay his defence.

The discovery of the ticket for Australia had, from the first, introduced to tragedy a farcical element.

When he had given his confidence to Pia Hamlyn he had, in reality, spoken with no desire to seek advice as to whether Maisie should or should not be informed of the matter.

He had long before determined to tell the girl nothing. Instinctively he knew that she would not take his point of view. Equally he had felt certain that Pia would give him attention and sympathy, and he had been curious to hear her judgment of the case. Even thus, he had on that occasion unconsciously revealed his conduct in the least damning light, and excuses had come involuntarily.

That the Courtfields might obtain knowledge in a version from Irene Spratt, was an idea not to be supported. Thence had arisen the irritating necessity to buy back Reesdale's letter.

In any case, Hawe regarded the fact of his *fiancée* having previously been engaged to the man whom he had wronged rather as a coincidence of no great significance than as a barrier to happiness. Maisie had acknowledged that she cared for her present lover more than she had ever cared for Jim. It thereupon occurred to Hawe, that the latter's death had been almost a fortunate circumstance. Even had the boy lived, Sidney would still have fallen in love with the girl, and complications would have ensued. The man knew himself well enough to guess that he would not have been restrained from declaring his feelings, by any scruple of honour. Where passion was concerned, a certain sense of self-importance and a pride in the strength of his own will were his sole deterrents.

He had lost true nobility of mind when he had learnt

his origin, and known himself to be a cipher in society, a mere mistake of circumstance. It was a spiritual state never to be entirely regained. He recognised that he was different from other men—set apart by heredity from the honourable—an Ishmael, whom no effort of his own could quite regenerate.

Yet here was a realisation that, oddly enough, brought with it no humiliation of spirit, but rather a new state of mind essentially combative and egotistical.

The man had fallen into a pit of shame prepared for him by others; in the depths of the abyss his soul still lay unconscious, stunned by the shock. But his mind, naturally self-assertive, had gained from necessity new strength, and like a weed growing high and straggling from the most barren soil, his intelligence had reached a kind of bold development. Behind this development there was, instead of moral support, the firm belief of the man in his own capabilities, and his pride in the iron determination that had helped him to success.

Thus the sole prop of his will-power was a hitherto unshaken conceit.

* * * * *

Arrived at the Courtfields, Hawe was shown by the new maid-servant into the sitting-room. As he entered it seemed unduly full of people. There were three persons, Cecilia, who had returned earlier than usual from her work, Maisie, and Brassy.

Hawe shook hands with everyone, and accepted tea. Then he sat down on the old-fashioned sofa beside Cecilia, answered her conversation without hearing it, and fixed his eyes and attention on the remaining couple.

They appeared well amused by one another. Hawe frowned and glowered. Brassy beamed. Later Maisie showed them both her picture post-cards. It was up into the doctor's face that she smiled most.

Brassy said that the picture of an extremely pretty music-hall artiste resembled the younger Miss Courtfield, who giggled and was gratified. Hawe said, "Absurd! There's not the slightest likeness," and earned coolness.

After an hour and a half, Brassy, evidently tiring of his intention to outstay the other (whose fixity of purpose was apparent), took his leave.

Directly he had disappeared, Cecilia having also withdrawn, Hawe gave vent to his outraged feelings. "The beast! Oh, Maisie, how could you look as if you liked him."

"I do," said Maisie, laughing, and permitted her lover's embrace.

Hawe stayed to dinner and was comforted.

CHAPTER V.

Hawe went to Scotland, and shot partridges and grouse.

"Dicky-birds," said Lady Betty Hoskins, with whose people he stayed for a week, "are beyond me, although I'm awfully sportin', you know. I love fishin', and all that, don't you? So nice and peaceful. You needn't get excited. I once shot a rabbit. It was sittin' on its nest. Oh! do they call them burrows? Never mind. But it got away. Still, I'm devoted to sport, and a man looks so nice with a gun, don't you think?"

Pia Hamlyn was one of the party of twelve. It proved to be an informal gathering, where the men outnumbered the women.

An American actress, a French count and his wife, and Peter Wyngate were among the guests. Besides, there was a fair sprinkling of young men all more or less attached to Lady Betty. Mr. St. Leger, whom Hawe remembered to have met at Maidenhead; a young captain of artillery; and a newly-fledged millionaire.

Despite the latter's youth, however, the bonds which held him were as yet insecure, and Lady Betty found it necessary to exercise the utmost cajolery. Thus her time was fully occupied, and Mr. St. Leger and the captain of artillery drifted for consolation to Mrs. Hamlyn.

Hawe entirely failed to understand Pia's attitude. On meeting her again he had felt some embarrassment, which, however, was soon allayed by the coolness and self-possession of her manner. She had greeted him almost as though he were a casual acquaintance; then had appeared to avoid his company.

Her face, as before, was carefully made-up, a return to the habit which he had formerly persuaded her to

relinquish, that caused Hawe some surprise and a little annoyance. Since the summer her whole style appeared, as well, to have suffered a deterioration. Her voice had grown louder, her conversation more *risqué*; the general effect of her clothes was theatrical.

And yet, whenever in her presence, Hawe felt himself at moments thrilled by the old fascination that she had exercised. It even seemed to him that occasions when he could feel at sympathy with her were more frequent now than they had ever been since her girlhood. He regarded the change in her as a pose that she had assumed, for some reason that he failed to fathom. It was apparent that she was choosing to copy the style of her acquaintances, whom she had confessed to thinking second-rate. Hawe thought that her face, in repose, often expressed a kind of despair that was without resignation—a restless misery, an absolute carelessness of convention, or indeed of self-respect.

While he pitied her intensely there were also moments when Pia's attitude almost inspired the man with disgust. He remembered how she had told him that Lady Betty's *fiancé* was avowedly in love with her.

He had, as well, a vivid recollection of her having informed him that "she had dropped Peter because it seemed the straight thing to do."

Now it was apparent that she had chosen to resume the old relations when Wyngate had been permitted as a useful "hanger-on." Indeed, Hawe imagined that, at present, she did more than passively accept Peter's protestations of devotion. The man paid her marked attention, which she appeared to encourage. His attachment formed a matter of jest for the house-party. Lady Betty, occupied with her millionaire, ignored a possible scandal. Such a condition seemed to Hawe an evidence of the very worst possible taste. He was amazed that Pia should choose to appear in so compromising a position. At the same time, he was aware that this very carelessness of consequences added to her magnetism.

She was the most popular woman in the house. When, in the evenings, she would sing little French songs in doubtful taste, a group of charmed listeners would always collect round the piano. She seemed to take vulgarity and infuse it with a characteristic that made it appear delightful. She cultivated impropriety of speech until it rose to an art.

Hawe alternated between extreme aversion and an impulse to tell her that she was adorable.

In the meantime, his thoughts and actions remained perfectly faithful to Maisie. Every day he wrote her long letters full of lover-like protestations. In return she sent only occasional answers and excused herself on the ground that she was a bad correspondent. After a week in Scotland, Hawe visited other country houses in England, and in a communication addressed to his *fiancée*, expressed his intention to return on a given date at the end of September. His purpose, however, suffered a slight alteration by an invitation he received to journey back to London by motor instead of by rail. A friend who owned an automobile offered to run him up to town, a trip that would take two days from the house where he was staying in Cumberland. Hawe accepted the proposition with pleasure. On the eve of his departure he wrote to Maisie: "I shall reach town on the 25th, instead of the 23rd, so you may expect to see me the following afternoon."

The journey was duly undertaken.

On the first day, a breakdown necessitated repairs, which wasted twenty-four hours. The owner of the car treated the matter as a joke, and spoke of making up for lost time. It did not occur to Hawe to communicate with the Courtfields. Explanations might follow upon his arrival. The trip was, however, not destined to be lucky. They were again delayed by a second trifling accident, and only reached town on the evening of the fourth day after their departure. Hawe dined at his friend's club before returning to his rooms in Wigmore Street.

On eventually reaching home, he found awaiting him

a good many letters. They lay littered over the table of his sitting-room and he turned them over idly—too tired to be interested. There were half-a-dozen bills—he guessed them from their narrow envelopes, one or two probable invitations, a communication from his banker.

Then a missive, seemingly different to the others, arrested his attention. He regarded the superscription with a sense that the untidy, ill-bred writing was somehow familiar. He tore open the envelope, and read the enclosed letter.

"DEAR SIR,—I beg to write and trouble you once more. You will Recollect the ocasion of our last Meeting. I Refer to what took place between us in June in Kensington Gardens. You will Recollect my friend, who is in the Vegetables. Him and me is now Married, as you will see by my name Sined below. I left miss Courtfield to better myself and settle down we have a Shop. Last Monday I goes to visit miss c, at the flat she was not in but I sees miss masie. She tells me you are engaged, but that it is not quite settled I expres no Surprise having guessed as you will Recollect. She tells me Date of your return from country and we has Friendly Chat. I returns home and me and my husband discuses Same, and arrives at following facts. 1st. That you having done as you did are not suitable husband for young girl like miss masie. 2nd. That it is our Duty to stop swindle being honest. 3rd. That altho' you bought and paid for writing left on kitchen floor and found by me, you did not pay for me holding my tonge. 4th. That I require payment.

"I shall be obliged by receiving from you by return the sum of £20 (twenty pounds.) If I do not I shall go to miss Courtfield and tell her what I know.

"I remain

"Your obedient servant.

"(MRS) IRENE HIGGINS (SPRATT)."

The sheet of paper fell from Hawe's fingers to the floor. Then he sank into the nearest chair and rested

his elbow on the table and his chin on his hand. After a moment, mechanically he brought from his pocket a cigarette case and a box of matches. He began to smoke steadily and rather fast. His brain worked rapidly. Presently he stooped and picked up the letter from the ground. He regarded the first page and noted the date, which was of a week ago. In the top right-hand corner were scrawled the words: "address post office High Street Camberwell."

Hawe smiled. "That's smart," he murmured. Irene Higgins (*née* Spratt) had evidently no intention that he should visit her or know her present whereabouts.

"The twenty-fourth," he ruminated; "the twenty-fourth. Of course, she thought I would be back on the twenty-fifth. To-day's the thirtieth. Good Lord!" He sprang to his feet, threw away the half-smoked cigarette, plunged his hands in his pockets, and paced the room. "Will she have told Cecilia already? Surely not—yet, out of spite—perhaps. Damn her! What am I to do? What am I to do? 'By return,' she says—by return. And it's nearly a week ago. Good Lord!"

He snatched the letter from the table, and re-read it from beginning to end. Then he tore it savagely across and let the pieces drop. "What's to be done?" he repeated, and resumed his pacing to and fro.

He realised quickly that, in any case, he must act in a fog, not knowing whether the Courtfields had learnt his secret. Only by calling on them at the earliest opportunity could his mind be set at rest. If Irene had been before him, there must be explanations, a divulgence of the whole truth, a revelation of the entire discreditable proceeding, a fight against prejudiced opinion.

Or would it be wiser to deny the allegation? There was no proof. To hold to the pretence of having lost Reesdale's letter, to assert that it had never held any incriminating evidence, to show hurt surprise at any doubt of his integrity—(as he reached this point, Hawe threw back his head with a bitter little laugh)—and to ask whether his word, or that of a servant, were more

acceptable; here was a course which, while it required falsehood, might help him from his difficulty.

Until the early hours of the morning Hawe remained out of bed, to mentally rehearse a thousand plans, to wonder which was best, and whether this were the end of his dream of happiness. He alternated between despair and hope. Impulses that seemed to drag him down into a very slough of dishonour fought against efforts of his will to rise and confess the wrong he had done.

Dawn found him still irresolute and dog-tired. He went to bed and slept till midday. He awoke to full recollection of his trouble, and a decision that chance must guide his movements. Primarily he must be influenced by the extent of the Courtfields' knowledge. Then his own defence must be ruled by their attitude. He determined that he would follow the inclination of the moment, whether it should suggest truth or prevarication.

In this mood he started, immediately after lunch, for West Kensington. Shuttered shop windows and a general air of desertion and religious melancholy that pervaded the street reminded him that it was Sunday. On foot he traversed the Park to Knightsbridge. In the air was the first chill of autumn. From the trees brown and yellow leaves fell to earth, and there were not allowed to rest: the wind pursued them, and in huddled groups or singly, like little frightened animals that seek to hide from an enemy, they ran along the ground.

As eventually he reached Rosemore Mansions, Hawe was suddenly reminded of the occasion of his first visit. It also had taken place on a Sunday. The season had been Spring. The air had smelt and tasted of life, and he had come as a messenger of death. It had seemed only fitting that from a conjunction of the two rules of the universe, love should have grown. The force of the present contrast made him shudder.

Impatient life and desire were only in his thoughts. Death was in the atmosphere. Under such conditions how could love prosper?

He ran up the stone steps and pressed the electric bell of Number 29.

Ah! he had lived since the first occasion of his coming.

His heart beat suffocatingly with expectation.

The door was opened by the new maid-servant. Momentarily it seemed to Hawe strange that he should not once more be face to face with Cecilia on the threshold: having to introduce himself and explain his presence.

He was admitted and ushered into the empty sitting-room.

Its aspect had not changed since first he had seen it. But now it impressed him afresh by its singular hideousness. Always more or less acutely sensible of the effect of his surroundings, he felt that to-day his consciousness was unduly augmented. His sight seemed to have grown more keen.

He noticed every detail of the arrangement of the room and endured an increasing irritation. His judgment had become hypercritical. Even his faculty of hearing seemed to have grown more delicately keen. The canary in the green-and-gilt cage sang as lustily as ever. Hawe had the impulse to cover his ears with his hands. Then, as a door slammed in the distance, he started violently, and a hot, pricking sweat broke out on his body. His very sense of touch appeared to have grown finer and more acute. He felt tortured by the actual contact between skin and clothes.

This was the whole effect of a mind held at high nervous tension. Hawe's thoughts passed through his brain, like the distorted figures of a shadow-show, wrongly focussed, and in character absolutely vague.

Thus, at one moment, he would deliberate the manner of his greeting directly Maisie or Cecilia should enter the room; the next, he set himself to fancy how, if he had the choice, he would rearrange, more in accordance with his own taste, the furniture of the sitting-room.

But this tension of the nerves, that showed itself in a physical effect, was in itself attributable to a bodily cause. For the last fortnight or three weeks, Hawe had felt

thoroughly ill. He was besieged by insistent headaches and a sense of growing lassitude. He laughed at himself and would not give in. "Must have a touch of liver," he reflected. "I've never had a sickness in my life." Then as his inability to shake off his weakness continued, he merely set his teeth and fought through each day. He could not take his thoughts off his own condition, and now he was able to trace it to the period of his leaving St. Malo. The stench of the narrow paved streets of the little French town seemed to have remained in his nostrils, the peculiar taste of a glass of water, that he remembered to have drunk on one of his last days, when he had been heated with playing tennis, remained in his mouth. He was left to his thoughts by the non-appearance of any other person, for a period that seemed to him interminable. In reality, after a lapse of five minutes the door opened, and Cecilia Courtfield entered the room.

At the moment of her appearance, all knowledge of any intention he might have formed, as to how he would behave, faded from his mind.

He rose from his seat, and stood in the centre of the room, staring at her blankly.

She deliberately turned her back on him, and closed the door with a slow precision that reminded him irresistibly of the method of a doctor in a consulting-room.

As she faced him once more, his presence of mind returned.

He advanced towards her, smiled and held out his hand.

"How are you?" he said. "You see, I'm back at last. How's Maisie? I should have let her know I'd be delayed, only——"

Cecilia had not moved from her position, just within the room.

She did not look at him as she spoke.

"Thanks," she said rather slowly, and with a certain dignity. "I would prefer not to shake hands with you, Mr. Hawe."

CHAPTER VI.

AT her words Hawe's outstretched palm dropped immediately to his side. With an end to doubt of the situation he had to face, he was suddenly conscious of feeling perfectly cool and self-possessed. His mind, a moment since overwrought, and in its state most like a fine instrument out of tune, seemed now to have regained its normal pitch ; even, in the last few moments, to have been strung tight for argument, by the master-hand of necessity.

After an instant's pause, he put both hands in his pockets, and regarded Cecilia with a little deprecating smile and raised eyebrows.

"What's the row ?" he said.

She did not at once answer, but passed him and sat down sideways on a chair. Then she leant her elbow on its wooden back, rested her head against her hand, and for the first time looked up into his face.

Her own appeared plainer than usual, the complexion more sallow, the features more horse-like. Hawe was, however, struck by a peculiar expression in her eyes : a look that was rather ashamed and afraid than accusative. Thence he took an added courage, tinged with curiosity.

At last Cecilia spoke. Her tone, as usual, strong-minded and abrupt, belied the representation of her eyes.

"Don't let's waste time beating about the bush," she said. "You see I'm quite sure of the information I've received."

"Are you really ?" returned Hawe composedly, "then I wonder whether you'd mind sharing it with me ?"

Cecilia bit her lip, but otherwise did not move.

"It seems unnecessary to treat the matter as a joke," she said slowly, "and I don't for one moment believe

that you misunderstand my meaning. However, if you wish for an explanation, I'm quite prepared to let you have it. Three days ago our old servant Irene called here and desired an interview with me. She told me everything. Her story hinged on the discovery of that letter—from—the communication that you read in my presence, on the first day of your coming to the flat."

She had ended almost pedantically. Now she paused and took a deep breath. The fingers of the hand that lay in her lap twitched.

Hawe resumed his seat on the old-fashioned sofa. When he spoke his brows were wrinkled comically, his tone held a trace of lenient amusement.

"Oh, yes," he said. "Quite so. I'm afraid my memory isn't as good as yours. I can't quite recall every incident of that day. It was some time ago, wasn't it? But—a letter? Oh, yes, of course. . . . From poor old Reesdale. How could I forget it? And—I lost it."

"Its loss, if I remember, caused you some anxiety?" said Cecilia, speaking no faster than before, but with a certain eagerness.

"Naturally," said Hawe gravely.

"And you imagined, did you not, that you might have left it here? I told you it had not been found, but I spoke without knowing. It appears that Irene discovered and read it."

"Oh!" said Hawe.

For a moment he looked steadily at a spot on the carpet. Then he lifted to Cecilia serious and inquiring eyes.

"So she has returned my letter to you?" he said.

"No," answered Miss Courtfield. "I wish she had. Only, after reading it, she said that she was overtaken by the sense of having performed a deceitful action. It seemed to her that the letter had been thrown away on the floor. Consequently she burnt it."

"Oh!" repeated Hawe. He wanted dreadfully to laugh. He covered his mouth with one hand, and pulled thoughtfully at his moustache.

Cecilia continued as though with an effort—"After having destroyed it, however, she could not recover from the impression it had made on her mind. She said that it was not a letter that anyone after reading could forget in a hurry. And she told me what it was about."

As Cecilia once more ceased, Hawe made no comment, but his attitude grew slightly more attentive. He leaned rather forward in his seat, with an elbow resting on his knee.

"It appears—that this letter was evidence—of your having at some time—gravely wronged the writer," continued Cecilia, hesitatingly. "Yet—I knew it was from Jim—and you have always pretended, that you were his greatest friend."

Hawe opened his lips as though to speak, but seemed the next second to change his intention, and pressed them together again more firmly.

"Irene said—that the letter referred to some swindle—through which—Jim must have lost—large quantities of money. He spoke of—having been—robbed—and ruined. And he wrote—that there was no course—left to him but—suicide."

Cecilia stopped with a gasp.

For a moment Hawe waited. Then, in a perfectly level tone, he asked—

"What has this got to do with me?"

Miss Courtfield rose abruptly from her seat. Her hands clasped each other convulsively. Her complexion took on a sudden dull red colour.

"You need to be told?" she said. "You need to be told?" Her voice quivered with excitement. In front of the man she made a few paces to and fro. "Well, I will tell you. You were responsible for his death. And we imagined you were his friend. Good God! his *friend*—and you ruined him—brought him to—"

Her utterance sounded choked. Without finishing her sentence she turned her back on Hawe, moved to the window, drew aside the muslin blind and looked out.

The man rose from his seat and took up a position

with his back to the mantelpiece. He gave a little cough before he spoke.

"Miss Courtfield," he said, "I'm afraid I don't quite understand. Is the ready invention of a servant to kill the trust that I have always hoped you put in me?"

Cecilia turned and stared at him.

Hawe returned her gaze and smiled very slightly. He made a little airy gesture with his hand.

"Please judge," he added, "whether she or I be better worth believing."

Cecilia advanced till she stood directly opposite the man. The tailor-made coat she wore had on either side a mannish pocket. Into these she plunged her hands, as Hawe had done in his own case a moment since. She appeared a more masculine figure than ever. She stood close to Hawe and scrutinised his face, which was on a direct level with her own. After an appreciable delay she spoke.

"You liar!" she said.

The man took a sharp breath, and threw back his head.

Immediately after her words, the woman's face had flushed almost purple. She blinked her eyelids to force back the scalding water.

But she stood her ground.

Hawe's eyes did not now meet her regard. His lips assumed momentarily a bluish tinge. He moistened them, and breathed as though with difficulty through his open mouth. Presently he spoke in a tone curiously suppressed and quiet.

"No man has ever called me that."

"It has remained for a woman to find you out," said Cecilia quickly.

He answered her in his former manner.

"Thanks for reminding me of your sex. I am in danger of forgetting it."

Cecilia gave a little laugh of pure bravado. She turned away, and flung herself once more into a seat.

"I'm not in the least afraid of you," she said, and again fixed her eyes on his face.

Hawe swung round, leant his elbows on the mantelpiece, and bit his knuckles. He felt himself shaking from head to foot with restrained fury.

Then Cecilia resumed, in a hurried tone: "I shouldn't have spoken, without proof that Irene told the truth. In the letter, she said, there was, as well, a reference to some injury you had recently received. Jim appeared to have known about it. Irene even received the impression that there had been an interview and a quarrel. There was some mention of a revolver having been fired. Irene said that one phrase of the letter had stayed in her mind. 'I wish,' it ran, 'that when I fired at you, I had blown out your brains, instead of only wounding you slightly.' Irene said ——"

Hawe, with a violent start, had again turned to face Cecilia. His eyes had suddenly grown alert and watchful. His lips twitched.

"Have I reached another point which you wish to deny?" said Miss Courtfield, with a sneer.

He appeared to make an effort to pull himself together.

"No," he replied slowly, "no. Only—your informant's memory must be quite miraculous. To have mentally retained the actual words of the letter, after having once read it, last February, I think? Surely a surprising fact!"

"You allow, then, that she remembered the phrase accurately," said Cecilia. "That suggests that you, as well, must have some recollection of it . . . No; please, don't interrupt for a moment. I want to tell you how I obtained proof of these statements. I was reminded, by the last item of information, that, on the day when you first came to the flat, you suffered from severe lameness, which, by the way, has never troubled you since. You led me then to believe that it was due to inflammation of an old hurt. There was only one other person who shared your knowledge of the injury. I have therefore consulted him, and—he has told me the truth."

"W—what do you mean?" stammered Hawe.

"I mean," said Cecilia, deliberately, leaning forward in her seat, "that I asked Dr. Brassy here, and repeated to him the whole story; that then I requested him to tell me what had been the true nature of the injury to your knee, and that I ascertained from him, that you had been suffering from a bullet-wound recently inflicted."

Hawe took a forward step, with hands clenched by his side. His colour was mottled, his eyes, like an angry dog's, held a red gleam. "It's a lie," he said thickly. "He had no right—he exceeded all bounds of professional etiquette in speaking of my affairs——"

"It seems to me," returned Cecilia without changing her attitude, "that the question was not one to be ruled by etiquette. In consulting Dr. Brassy, I required the truth. I believe he gave it me. In fact, I'll allow that I'm inclined to take his word against yours."

Hawe advanced another step, and stood in the centre of the room, staring down at the woman. His fingers itched to grip something. His brain felt as though it were on fire. His self-control seemed slipping—slipping. When he spoke, he had the impression that he heard his own voice from a long distance.

"If you weren't a woman, I guess I'd make you pay for that. I'd do for a man who called me a liar. What if I am? That's my affair—I've a right to plead 'not guilty'—it's an appeal for defence. Who's Brassy, that you should believe him—the sneak!"

His hands once more were dug into his pockets to hide their convulsive twitching. He began to pace the room. Before Cecilia could frame words for a reply, he continued, "See here, you only know one side—even less. I can explain—some—That letter—he was off his head—'most—when he wrote it. There—I'll confess the subject of it. I did swindle him—And there was an almighty row—But I tried to make amends—and—I swear he was never my pal."

Cecilia rose, and stood leaning one hand on the end of the sofa.

"I don't know what you're saying," she answered firmly, "and I don't want to hear any more. You're self-convicted. You came here first, as Jim's friend, and for that reason—we welcomed you. Now that I know——"

Hawe interrupted her with an exasperated exclamation.

"Nonsense. In justice, you must hear what I've got to say."

"I do not want to," said Celilia, while a greenish pallor crept over her face. "I only wish you to get out of my sight," she repeated, "and never again to come within it."

Hawe burst into a savage little laugh.

"No, I'm hanged if I'll go—yet," he said, "You can't make me—and you shan't prevent my trying to explain. Play fair. Listen."

"You cad!" said Cecilia furiously.

He laughed again—the same short, uncontrolled sound.

"Yes," he said. "I know. There's half the explanation. I was born so. To be straight isn't in my blood. But now I'm engaged to marry your sister. D'you see? And I mean to make a fight against your persuading her to chuck me."

Miss Courtfield seemed, for a few moments, to lean her whole weight for support against the sofa-head. Then she straightened herself, and looked steadily at the man.

"There can be no question of a continuance of the engagement," she said.

Hawe passed a hand restlessly round one side of his face. The movement expressed consuming impatience and irritation.

"You can't expect me to take that from you," he returned.

Cecilia picked at a little button on the sofa-covering.

"Maisie has asked me—to tell you—that she wishes the engagement to be broken off."

The blood rushed to Hawe's head. He could feel

it pulsing in his temples, as though it would burst the skin. He put up both hands, and felt the throbbing beneath his fingers.

"She wishes it!" he said, with a little weak laugh—"she wishes it!"

For a moment, there seemed before his eyes a black mist. He clutched at a chair-back, and steadied himself. Then Cecilia's continued speech reached him.

"You could hardly expect otherwise. She even asked me to see you on the matter, because she is determined not to meet you again. I find it hard enough," she added, "to breathe the same air as a person, whom I consider morally a murderer."

Hawe's fingers clenched the chair-back till the knuckles showed white.

"Without a hearing?" he muttered—"without a hearing? Then—she never cared. I don't believe it. You've influenced her against me—you!"

He flung himself so violently away from the chair that it fell to the ground. As he stood, his body swayed slightly from side to side. The blood had left his face. It appeared livid. Only the whites of his eyes were suffused with red.

"You," he said—"you, with your story of my villainy, and your cocksure supposition that I was all along most to blame. I'm morally guilty of murder, am I? and you'll have told her so. Well, there are thousands who've killed outright in the heat of a moment. And I've not done that—I've clean hands." He held them out towards her. "And I've proof that they're clean. The suicide was bluff. He died by accident. With a ticket for Australia in his pocket. He was going to make a bolt. D'you see?"

Cecilia breathed quickly—"How am I to know," she interposed.

"Listen," said Hawe, cutting her short. "Will you listen? I was not to blame, except in one matter, which I put right. He was his own master, anyway. He'd made the country too hot for him."

"Oh!" exclaimed Cecilia passionately. "How dare

you say so? You cur! to blame a dead man. D'you think you're improving your case! Oh go—get out of my sight!"

The next instant Hawe had caught her roughly by either wrist. She struggled in his grasp, panting for breath.

"See here," he said, and as he spoke he showed his clenched teeth—"see here—I shan't quit till I've given my defence. If you'll not listen, I'll speak to Maisie. I demand to see her—right away now."

"Let go my hands," said Cecilia—"let go my hands."

"I won't—not till you'll listen, or give me your word to fetch Maisie."

The woman still strove to pull away her wrists.

"You cad!" she repeated—"you cad!"

Once more he laughed, and bent down above her his face so that his hot breath burnt her cheek.

"There's a paucity in your ideas," he said, and continued speaking very fast. "You called me that before. I told you, I was born so—a bastard. There, d'you understand? And first I'd been taught what should be held in respect—women, religion, scruples of right and wrong. It was suddenly I learnt that a God of Justice doesn't exist, that my own mother had not been chaste, that dishonour was in my blood. D'you think that a man who has had such a lesson as mine forced upon him would be likely to keep straight? D'you wonder that when I came to fight my way in the world, with my hand against every man, and every man's hand against mine, d'you wonder that I did not hesitate to use fools for my own advantage? He was a fool—your Reesdale—and weak. At least I have lived starved, fought, done active wrong. I tell you I, as a blackguard, am of more worth than he could ever have been, just because I sinned, deliberately, by choice, for a set purpose. D'you see? I wanted money. I got it. Anything else that I ever desired I've obtained. Where's been the harm, anyway? I'm of no account. By heaven! I only wonder that I have not done far worse!"

While he spoke, Cecilia had never ceased for a moment to twist her wrists in violent efforts to free them from his grasp. Her lips were tightly set. The perspiration stood out in beads on her forehead. Now, in a gasping voice—"Let go my hands," she reiterated. "Are you mad? Let go my hands."

He looked down at them, and seemed for the first time aware of what he held. Gradually he loosened the vice-like grip. His own hands fell to his sides. Released, Cecilia dropped back on to the sofa, in front of which she had been standing. She leant her head against the cushions. Her face assumed the grey tinge of faintness. Her whole big frame shook convulsively.

Hawe stood gazing down upon her. He passed his fingers across his eyes and blinked the lids in the manner of one who seeks to dispel an illusion.

"What have I said?" he inquired vaguely. "What have I done? I don't think I knew. I beg your pardon."

"Go!" she panted. "Leave the flat!"

He looked round him, and moved towards the door. Then he stopped.

"No," he said, in his former excitable tones. "I must see Maisie. It's my right. I won't quit till she tells me. She'll let me explain; she won't chuck me without a hearing. Where's Maisie? I say, where's Maisie?"

His voice had risen almost to a shout. His expression was distorted afresh with rage.

Cecilia sat up, clutching at the sofa head. Anger to match his own and terror struggled in her face.

"Don't flatter yourself she ever cared for you. She was playing, amusing herself. She never meant to marry you. Now do you want to see her?"

Hawe put a hand to his head and laughed. "I don't believe it," he said, and stared at the floor.

Cecilia pulled herself to her feet. "It's true," she said, "true." In her tone there was such a conviction that belief was forced on the man's mind. As she continued there seemed no room for doubt.

"I tell you, she was only fooling you all the summer. It was between you and Brassy; she could never quite decide. And I knew. There was the same understanding with him; she wouldn't call it an engagement. I knew all along. And now it's been settled while you were away. She wants to marry Brassy. She doesn't even know the story of this affair. I've kept it from her. She asked me to-day to break it to you, that she doesn't care for you as she thought she did."

Cecilia gave a little laugh, that was half a gasp, then went on—

"So there, you've been well fooled. Now d'you want to see her?"

Hawe had backed towards the door. He stood leaning his shoulders against the woodwork.

"Brassy?" he said. "Brassy?" Once more the blood rushed to his head. Before his eyes the room appeared blotted out in a blackness, from the midst of which Cecilia's voice sounded faint and her speech fragmentary. "She's not to blame; a mere child. I'd have pretended that the deeper reason was her motive, only I think the truth will come harder to you. She never cared—there! From the first she doubted, and told me. D'you remember the day we discussed settlements? . . . Now will you go?"

Hawe groped behind him for the door-handle, found it at last, and turned it. Then he waited for the darkness to clear from before his eyes. Gradually it lifted. He could see the room. But black spots and shreds—as of a broken cloud—danced and drifted before his vision. He felt as though he had been drinking heavily. He did not exactly know what had happened. He was uncertain of his present locality. Only one fact, one word, remained printed on his consciousness. "Brassy," he said again, and repeated the word over and over in a dull monotone.

"Yes," said Cecilia, in a shrill quaver. "Brassy. He's the better man. And I'm glad she fooled you—glad—glad. I think it'll have hurt you, wounded your conceit, rolled your vanity in the dust. You never

cared other than selfishly. Oh! I'm glad that she should even have stooped to dishonour. Now, will you go?"

"Yes," said Hawe. "Thanks. Of course." He left the room, took his hat from the stand in the passage, and opened the front door.

Then two distinct and separate sounds made him pause. He stood in a listening attitude, holding his hat in one hand, while the other rested on the door-handle.

From a room at the end of the passage came the dulled vibration of a fresh young voice singing the refrain of an old popular song. Hawe caught a few of the words.

"Sammy, oh, oh, oh, Sammy,
For you I'm pining when we're apart,
Sammy, when you come wooing. . . ."

And through the still open door of the sitting-room, there drifted the sound of a woman's uncontrolled sobbing, violent and hysterical.

Hawe left the flat and walked slowly down the stone stairs.

CHAPTER VII.

IN the street, Hawe's first consideration was the necessity to walk straight along the pavement. He felt a disposition to lurch from side to side. It was only by a great effort that he managed to control his gait. His sensations were those of a drunken man. Liquid fire seemed to run in his veins. His brain was befogged. He suffered from the hallucination that everything around him was moving. The houses on either side of the street appeared to lean towards him. The aspect of their windows was curiously distorted. He could have imagined them as rows of grinning faces, which mocked him as he passed. He became suddenly aware that he was bareheaded, and that he still held his hat in his hand. He paused, regarded it critically, brushed it with his sleeve, and then, forgetting to put it on, moved forward. His forehead felt burning hot. If only the black spots would clear from before his eyes! He found them very confusing. They seemed to crowd and dance in his way. To push forward against them was horrible. Yet, he realised that they only existed in his imagination—the effect of blood over-heated and poisoned by violent anger. His mouth and throat were dry, and at the same time held a filthy taste.

Odd. He remembered how a man had once described to him, after the event, his sensations during a first attack of delirium tremens. The account coincided strangely with his present state. He wondered dully whether, in reality, he might be suffering from the same disease. It seemed unlikely. He had always considered his own habits particularly temperate. Then what was the matter? He couldn't really be drunk. He recalled a particular occasion of many years ago, when he had been uproariously intoxicated. He had a vivid recollection of

having clung to a lamp-post for support, and of having felt impelled to give voice to a song of patriotic sentiment.

Curiously enough, there was, at this very moment, a tune pulsing and swinging in his head. And—there were the words to fit it—if he could but remember them—Something about “Sammy—oh—oh—oh—, Sammy”—How absurd! Where was the sense in that, anyway? Good heavens! his whiskey-and-soda at lunch must, after all, have been too strong. His general rule for a midday peg was two fingers. What a fool to have taken more. . . .

He suddenly realised that he was passing a public-house. A vague idea to resort to a “hair of the dog that bit him” entered his mind. He pushed open the swing-door, and was aware that he lurched against the bar, and that the voice in which he asked for neat whiskey was surprisingly unlike his own.

“I should think you’d ’ad about enough a’ready,” said the man behind the counter, regarding him deprecatingly.

A wave of fresh fury passed over Hawe, causing him to feel physically sick. He knocked with his knuckles on the wooden ledge before him, and lent half across it.

“I guess that’s my affair,” he said with an oath. “Hand over!”

The barman laughed, and rapped down a glass, half-filled with spirit.

Hawe drank it at a gulp—then leant his elbow on the counter, gasping. In the next few moments, his dizziness passed, the fog lifted from his brain, and the illusion cleared from his vision. His throat and palate no longer felt as though made of india-rubber, but appeared to have been stung to life, by contact with the alcohol. He felt so far recovered as to abandon the idea that he had ever been intoxicated. Having paid his money, he left the public-house and stood once more in the open air. He drew a deep breath, and began to consider which direction he should take. He was uncertain of the street in which he found himself, and

feeling the necessity for exercise, disregarded the efforts of a cabman from a neighbouring stand to attract his attention. Eventually he found his way into Addison Road, and then started towards Kensington High Street.

As he walked along Hammersmith Broadway, he began, for the first time, to estimate clearly what had happened.

There had been the devil of a row with Cecilia. What had he said or done? He thought he must have been rather off his head. And—yes—he remembered—he had heard her crying, just before he came away. But there had been another sound, as well—the sound of a fresh young voice, heard through a closed door, in a few lines of an old popular song.

“Sammy —”

Why, that was the tune that had been all the rage! Hadn't it come out in some piece? Of course; he'd heard it on the barrel-organs.

Once more his thoughts wandered, became confused, moved like shadows in a fog. With a violent effort he cleared his mind, and returned to lucid deliberation.

Cecilia had said: There can be no question of a continuance of the engagement. “That was because of Reesdale. Then, why wouldn't she let me explain? Why wouldn't she listen? I believe I got mad. It wasn't fair to judge only by the letter. He wrote it when he didn't know what he was doing. She wouldn't give me a chance. If I could have spoken to Maisie. Yet what did she say? ‘Maisie don't want to see you—she's never cared—she's been fooling you—right along.’ And then—Good Lord!—Brassy!”

Hawe stopped still on the pavement. He became again conscious of the sensation that his intelligence was muffled in a pall of darkness, and against the darkness stood out a single word, a name printed in letters of fire.

“Brassy,” he reiterated, “Brassy, Brassy, Brassy.”

His lips moved, and he muttered below his breath. The poisonous taste returned to his mouth. He walked

steadily on, but felt an instinctive consuming desire to hide from his fellow-men, and at the same time an insatiate restlessness, that prompted him to move at a great pace. Gradually, too, he became aware that he was suffering physical discomfort from shooting pains in his head. These became so frequent and intense as to develop before long into a violent headache.

And still he kept blindly on his way. As he left Kensington, some impulse moved him to enter the Gardens.

He strode on towards Hyde Park Corner, perfectly unconscious of any future intention. Soon after he had passed the Albert Memorial, he was stopped by a man he knew, who laid an arresting hand on his arm, and greeted him cheerfully.

"Hullo, Hawe! You're in a great hurry. Where are you off to?"

"I don't know," said Hawe. "What did you say? D'you happen to know a fellow of the name of Brassy?"

"What—the chap with the yacht? No. Why?"

"Only—he's the devil," said Hawe.

The man laughed.

"You don't say. Oh, well, are you going on? See you at dinner to-night?"

"Of course," said Hawe, without the slightest recollection of having pledged himself to dine anywhere.

After reaching Hyde Park Corner, he struck northwards.

He strode down path after path—path after path—entirely oblivious of the direction he took. Eventually he reached a part of the Park that was quite deserted. Dusk was falling. The air struck chill. He shivered, and felt suddenly tired. He walked to a seat, sat down, and pressed both hands to his head. Still he was conscious only of purely physical disorganisation. He tried again to think, and found that he was merely considering the burning pain in his head. This was so far increased, that he wondered dully whether it would

drive him mad. He sat and stared at the gravel at his feet, and realised presently that he was counting the number of pebbles within the radius of his vision. He leant back in the seat and closed his eyes. Then he forced himself to recall everything that had occurred since, a few hours ago, he had arrived at Rosemore Mansions. Any recollection of what he had said or done in the interview with Cecilia eluded him, but he distinctly remembered how his anger had grown and grown, till it seemed that he was rather a discarnate, raging devil than a man. Then there had been the shock of knowing himself to have been fooled—the horror of the realisation that Maisie had deceived him, the instant wild, surging hatred of his rival, and thereupon a darkness as of mania descending on a mind overwrought. Now he deliberately returned to contemplation of his last sensation, the abrupt birth in his mind of violent, soul-consuming hatred, that had sprung in a moment from passive dislike and some slight jealousy.

He had thought, on a former occasion, that he could guess how a murderer must feel before actuated to crime by jealous fury. At present, only, he understood the full force of such an impulse. He desired more than anything else in the world to kill Brassy. He conjured up a mental picture of the man's throat, encircled by his own fingers. He allowed his imagination to dwell on how he would hold and press the windpipe. . . .

"It's near closin' time," said a voice.

Hawe started and looked up at the park-keeper, who stood before him.

"Gates close at this hour."

"What gates?" said Hawe.

"Come—move along, please," said the keeper, "you ain't allowed to stay in the Park all night."

Hawe rose to his feet, and again was overcome by dizziness, the result of the pain in his head.

The keeper grinned. "Steady on," he said; "'ad a drop too much?"

Hawe followed the man to the nearest exit, and found himself at Lancaster Gate. Thence he started to find his way back on foot to his lodgings in Wigmore Street. He let himself in with his latchkey, and went upstairs to his sitting-room. He only remembered his dinner-hour to discover that the very thought of food was nauseating. In any case, he was accustomed to take his meals at his club or with friends, so that there was no need to make a definite alteration in his habits. He flung himself into an arm-chair and lit a cigarette, only to throw it away almost immediately, spring to his feet and pace the room in uncontrollable restlessness. His hands, so tightly clenched that the finger-nails cut into the palms, were thrust into his pockets. His thoughts were once more in a tumult, as he fought the persistent homicidal idea that had come to him, as he had sat in the Park. The suggestion had been, as a matter of fact, nothing more than the figment of a disordered imagination — a mere impractical impulse of passion, that held no dangerous motive. Only to Hawe the notion seemed a horrible reality, perfectly possible of practice in the event of his losing for a moment his present self-control. He even dreaded to rest, lest sleep should come upon him, and while unconscious he should be mastered by his instinct, and awake a maniac ready for crime. Unreasonable with excitement, it appeared to him that such a contingency would be only the natural sequence of his present mood. It was necessary that he should remain master of his faculties. He continued to stride the narrow length of his room with monotonous regularity. His brain swam. It was as though a band of red hot metal encircled his head. He was tortured by recollections of Maisie at every phase.

He ground his teeth and swore to think how he had been fooled. Thus the night passed.

Morning found him still pacing his room, with steps that staggered. Sunlight filtered through the blinds, and the electric light that burnt on either side of his mantelpiece appeared, by contrast, ghastly. Still, he

took no notice of the change, and, without ceasing, moved to and fro in the shadows of the room. Suddenly the door opened, and his landlady entered. She started and exclaimed, when she saw him; then remarked on his early rising.

Hawe leant against the table with a hand to his head.

"By Jove! is it morning?" he said—"Guess I'll go and wash." His cold bath chilled, without refreshing him. Having dressed, he descended, shivering, once more to his sitting-room, to find that the first post had arrived. A small heap of letters awaited him on his breakfast-table. His state was too much one of collapse for him to be conscious of any particular interest in life. Without noting the superscription on the envelope, he opened the first missive that came under his hand. He dropped into a chair to read it, and struggled to fix his attention to master the purport of the lines, that seemed to dance before his eyes. The familiarity of the clear round handwriting first occurred to him, but he was too dazed for full recognition. He glanced to the end of the letter, and read the name that was signed with a curly flourish: "Maisie Courtfield."

His face suddenly flushed; his heart beat suffocatingly. His first intention was to tear the written sheet across and throw it aside, without giving it further notice. Why should she write to him, when, by her own act, she had excluded him even from the pale of her acquaintance? Yet, before he had made up his mind to ignore it, Hawe had perused the letter from beginning to end. Then indeed, with a smothered exclamation, he sprang to his feet, tore the missive into a dozen pieces, and threw them into the fire that burnt in the grate.

His face once more showed all the symptoms of consuming irritation. He started afresh to pace the room. It was apparent that Maisie's communication had stung his temper anew. Had his mood, however, been less originally overwrought, he might have

recognised that she had written with excellent intentions.

She had begun her letter—"My Dear Sidney," and had gone on to express easy penitence, and a hope that they would remain friends. "As our engagement was never quite certain, I am sure you will forgive me," she had written, freely underlining her words; and further—"I am *dreadfully* sorry to have made the mistake. But I am afraid that I do not *honestly* care, as much as I thought I did."

There was no mention of Brassy.

"I do hope that you will soon come and see me, to show that I am forgiven," she had concluded in a post-script.

Hawe strolled up and down and cursed. "She thinks—does she—that I'll break my heart, and then come back, like a whipped cur? Oh! if I could make her believe that I had never cared! Oh! if I could pretend that I had been playing the very same game!"

The letter, with its somewhat smug protestations of sorrow, and its suggestion (given in all honesty, but lacking in tact) of continued friendship, had goaded the recipient to such an extreme of anger that retaliation—that savage instinct which lies only dormant in the best of men—awoke within him and clamoured for fulfilment. He listened to its prompting. Forgetful of all self-control, all gentler motives, even of all courtesy due to a woman, he allowed himself to be overruled by the consuming wish to humble Maisie, as he himself had been humbled. "Hit back," raved the uncivilised sense within him. "Hit back—as you've been hurt. Show yourself a man—not to be trifled with! Do as you've been done by. Strike at her conceit. Make her feel as much a fool, as she has made of you!"

When passion of any kind causes a man to lose his head, it suggests, simultaneously, action to which he will set his hand, without a moment's thought for the consequences.

Thus Hawe, prompted by a veritable frenzy of anger (that rose from an agony of wounded self-esteem and

was aggravated by a weakened physical condition) conceived the plan of an answering letter, which he would send to the girl.

He immediately sat down at his writing-table, which stood in one of the windows of the room, took paper and pen, then paused, struck by a new idea. Any extravagance of thought was possible to his fevered mind.

"At least there's one woman who cares. There's Pia. And, after all, I was mad about her once. Now, why not pretend?"

Without further hesitation, he dashed off the following letter—

"DEAR MAISIE,—Thanks for your note. As I saw Cecilia yesterday, and received from her your message, I scarcely needed any further intimation of how matters stand between us. However, I am glad of this opportunity to write and offer you my congratulations on your engagement to Dr. Brassy. I understand that it was arranged between you in the summer. Please accept my apologies for not having sooner expressed my wishes for your happiness. I was not previously aware of the true nature of the future you contemplated.

"Our summer holiday at St. Servan was well spent, was it not? I am quite of your opinion that love-making is eminently suited to August, but that it should not last beyond September, unless with serious intention. It therefore came to me quite as a matter of course that you should break off our engagement—I beg your pardon, 'our understanding'—for, naturally, it was in no sense a betrothal, and we were never bound to one another by any promise.

"Your forethought, however, in making clear to me our present relation, renders it easy for me to make a confession that I have long had in my mind. I have also, at last, fallen seriously in love, and am lucky enough already to have been accepted by the lady, whose name is Mrs. Hamlyn. I think I have mentioned her to you. I have cared for her for a great

many years, and consider myself now exceptionally lucky in having gained her affection. We hope to be quietly married in a few months.

"As my time is, at present, fully occupied, I must decline your kind invitation to call.

"Meanwhile, believe me,

"Sincerely,

"SIDNEY HAWK."

Without re-reading the letter he had written, or giving another thought, in his hot excitement, to the fabrication it contained, he put the sheet in an envelope addressed to Miss Maisie Courtfield and rushed out of doors himself to post it.

He returned to his rooms and a consideration of breakfast.

Then it suddenly flashed upon him what he had done. He would immediately have given all he possessed to regain the letter that he had just posted.

In the midst of his self-blame, a particular sentence that he had written recurred to him, with special vividness.

"We hope to be quietly married in a few months."

"Now, what the devil made me put that?" he said to himself.

The thought caused him abruptly to break into a great shout of uncontrolled laughter.

CHAPTER VIII.

AFTER breakfast he attempted to smoke, only to find that the taste of tobacco sickened him, and that his headache was intensified.

He sat idly staring at the outer page of his daily paper, conscious only of mental and physical exhaustion, till, finally, he roused himself, and, with the conviction that fresh air would bring relief, sallied out of doors. He was consumed now by the same restlessness that had filled him on the preceding day. He paced the streets, as though he were actually in a great hurry to reach a certain destination, though, as a matter of fact, he was careless of any direction he took.

Thoughts crowded and pressed on his mind like a mob that wantonly destroys, by its numbers, a structure built only for the maintenance of a limited quantity. His brain felt as though it must give way, beneath the strain of continued excitement. Self-pity and self-blame surged over him like waves. Now he was overwhelmed by one, now engulfed by the other. Throughout his whole consciousness there was seething tumult and disorder. Physically he was worn out. His head throbbed, his circulation was low, his eyes ached for sleep, and the skin of his face seemed to be drawn and dry. The continued noise of the traffic in the street through which he passed was a perpetual torment, from which he could not escape. The fresh autumn air made him shiver. The sunshine appeared lifeless and without warmth, yet its glare brought water to his eyes.

He walked down Oxford Street, then turned into Bond Street, looked into a few shop windows, and finally bought a pair of gloves, which he did not in the least require. He had descended half-way towards Piccadilly,

when, from a shop at the corner of Grafton Street, Pia Hamlyn suddenly emerged and confronted him. Her motor was waiting in the road. She was, as usual, too extravagantly gowned for the time of day and the edicts of good taste. On seeing Hawe she paused and said, "Hullo!"

"Good morning," he answered, and lifted his hat, with a greater sense of embarrassment and a stronger desire to escape than any he had ever experienced. He even made as though to continue his way, but Pia was evidently in a mood for conversation. She stood before him smiling and perfectly at her ease, as she continued—

"What a jolly day, isn't it? Though you don't look as if you thought so. What's up? You're a perfect wreck. Don't say it's the 'flu' already."

"Oh, no," said Hawe, "it's n-nothing—at least, only a b-b-bit of a headache. I'm all right. How are you? B-b-been motoring?"

"Yes," said Pia, regarding him curiously.

Hawe felt the blood mount to his face. He cursed the stutter that had come on him from pure nervousness.

"Where are you off to now?" went on Mrs. Hamlyn quickly. "Can I give you a lift in the motor?"

"Oh, no, thanks," he answered, looking anywhere but into her face—"no thanks—really—I'm in a b-b-bit of a hurry—an ap-p-pointment at my club, you know. Thanks very much all the same. Good-bye."

He made a forward step.

Pia nodded. "Oh, well, good-bye," she said, and added immediately—

"Wait a moment, though."

He turned to face her once more.

She regarded him with cynically screwed-up eyes, and a faint smile.

"If you haven't anything particular to do this afternoon, and if the important appointment doesn't last over five o' clock—and if you want to—you may come to tea with me to-day, Toby," she said.

"Thanks," said Hawe, without deliberation, "I should like to."

He helped her into the motor, and watched her drive away. Then, as he continued towards Piccadilly, it suddenly occurred to him that she had called him by the old pet name of her invention, once more, for the first time since, the episode that was labelled in his mind, "*Amoureuse*."

Other considerations, however, almost immediately occupied his thoughts. He dreaded to meet Pia again, knowing that he had stooped to the unutterable meanness of using a woman's name for his own advantage. Now, as remorse had come on him, what could he do?

Should he write to Maisie, confess the fabrication—deny the statement—say, "I invented a lie, hoping to wound your pride as you had wounded mine"—adopt a course of humiliation, against which his whole nature protested?

Or should he——?

As the only other alternative presented itself to him, he stopped in his stride and, and for a full moment, stood still on the pavement, sunk in meditation.

It was obvious—his lie might be proved true. Why not? Pia cared—and, as for himself, what should be easier than to assume a passion that he had once felt? So he questioned himself, and doubted, even while he averred, the facility of such a pretence.

Then, as he walked on, he flung back his head with a little laugh, that caused some passers-by to turn and stare at him.

It should not be his fault, if he were not married—"quietly married"—a few months hence. Nor would he fail to have the ceremony announced in every morning paper in London.

The Courtfields probably took the *Daily Mail*. Therein he would consequently cause to be inserted a paragraph shortly describing the wedding.

If Pia cared—

Anyway, where was the harm?

He thought himself fully capable of making a woman happy. As, in the present case, emotion would have no part in the motive of his proposal, sentiment might be

feigned. Thus, however, his love-making might even prove all the more convincing.

Oh! he would act his part well. Spurred by recollections of Maisie's faithlessness, he would as soon and as easily pledge himself anew; piqued by the condescension of her written apologies, he would show himself careless of her whim.

And, simultaneously, he would prove himself not a liar.

Hawe walked on to his club, lunched, and drank champagne to his own health and that of his future wife.

Later he deliberated afresh his scheme, and decided to put it into immediate practice. This very afternoon he would propose to Pia Hamlyn.

The idea filled him with an excitement, which he felt to be unreasonable. He grew cold with nervous expectation. Assigning his state of mind to the effect of a sleepless night, he sought to fortify himself in his intention by partaking of an extra whiskey-and-soda, before driving to the house in Sloane Street. On the way, he felt rather the same dread of the impending interview, as is experienced by one who contemplates, with nerves over-wrought by pain, a visit to the dentist. At the door of Mrs. Hamlyn's residence, he was even possessed by the same senseless desire to escape before his summons could be answered. Then it occurred to him, with almost a sense of relief, that Pia might have other visitors, and that in consequence he would not have a chance of seeing her alone.

He was admitted and ushered into the drawing-room.

The front division of the room was illumined only by firelight, but a soft glow from the red shaded lamp shone over Mrs. Hamlyn's inner sanctum. Here she was seated, with an open book in her lap, and a tea-table drawn up beside her chair.

As Hawe entered, she did not rise, but held out her hand in greeting.

"How d'you do again?" she said. "Come and sit down. I'm spending a lazy afternoon, you see, and

don't mean to be at home to anyone but you, so you may consider yourself honoured."

"Splendid!" said Hawe, and felt his last hope slip from him.

A difference in Pia's appearance, since the morning, caused him to look at her sharply, as he seated himself near her. She wore a deep cream-coloured dress that he remembered to have once admired, and he was amazed to note that her face bore no trace of rouge or powder, but appeared pale and even sallow, as on the day when she had first acceded to his request. Further, her manner was the direct antithesis of his own. While he could not conceal his nervousness and general excitement, she seemed perfectly at her ease, inclined to be friendly, and at the same time filled with an even keener sense of cynical amusement than usual. They talked lightly on a variety of subjects, discussed their friends, at whose expense Pia was humorously quizzical, and partook of tea. Hawe leant back in his chair, laughed at Mrs. Hamlyn's witticisms, concurred with her arguments, and felt that he must go mad, if an opportunity of speaking on the matter that was uppermost in his mind did not soon present itself.

He watched the woman's hands, half-veiled in drooping lace, as they moved almost lazily about the business of tea-pouring, watched them with a kind of fascination, and vaguely contemplated leaning suddenly forward, snatching the long fingers between his own, and kissing them. He wondered how they would feel within his grasp—whether they would be cold, whether she would try to drag them away, what she would say. . . .

"Have a cigarette?" suggested Pia, as he put down his empty cup.

"No, thanks, I don't think I will. My head aches," he said.

"You look pulled down," she returned sympathetically.

As they continued talking, his object seemed every moment more remote, and every moment the fascination that she exercised grew.

"Say, Pia," he observed abruptly, after a few moments, "I wish you'd sing something."

She laughed. "My dear man! Directly after tea! How can I?"

"Please."

"Oh, well, if you insist; but I warn you, I shall only croak."

She rose and moved to the piano. "What shall I sing?" she said over her shoulder.

"Anything." He felt rather breathless.

She sat down on the music-stool and struck a few chords.

He approached her, and, leaning an elbow on the piano, looked down on her face.

"Oh, go away," she protested, laughing again rather tremulously. "You make me nervous, staring." Yet before he could change his position she had begun a song that was already known to him, a little hackneyed melody that still seemed to him infinitely sweet, and imbued with passionate thought and tender recollection.

"Do you remember, love, that day,
That sunlit day in June,
When all the world was harmony
And you the perfect tune?
No one has ever loved a tune,
As I that simple lay,
Content to live, because you were
So good to me that day."

She sang it very simply, yet with immense feeling. Her soft contralto voice thrilled to every note. Her fingers struck each accompanying chord with wonderful delicacy. Her eyes were bent on the keys.

Hawe experienced a quick, sharp shiver of sensation, that caused his heart to beat tumultuously.

As she ended, he involuntarily leaned closer towards her, and his breath came quickly.

Without looking up, she glided immediately into a minor melody, and sang again—

"Let us forget we loved each other much,
Let us forget we ever had to part,
Let us forget——"

Her voice suddenly broke huskily. She took rather a gasping breath, paused, and shook her head as though to convey that she could sing no more.

"Go on," said Hawe, almost roughly.

She obeyed with lips that quivered, and in a tone that was broken, despite her efforts—

"Let us forget that any look or touch,
E'er let in either to the other's heart.
Only, we'll sit——"

Once more she stopped, took her hands from the notes, and laid them in her lap; then, for the first time, she looked up into his face.

"You see," she said, with a dim, pathetic little smile, "I can't sing a bit, so soon after tea."

As she spoke she rose to her feet. The same instant he was beside her, clasping both her hands.

"Oh, Pia, my dear, how I do love you!"

The words came in a rush. He was scarcely conscious of what he said. Only his blood seemed to leap in his veins, and he felt overwhelmed by uncontrollable agitation.

Mrs. Hamlyn stood facing him, her eyes widely opened and fixed on his. All the colour appeared suddenly to have been drained from her lips and cheeks. Her mouth was set in a rigid line. For a moment, she did not seem to breathe. For a moment, she made no attempt to free her fingers from his grasp.

Then, unexpectedly, her face was contorted violently. She drew her breath in a great choking sob, and pulled away her hands. Turning, she leant against the piano. Her features were hidden. Her whole frame was shaken by a storm of weeping.

A form of terror took possession of Hawe.

The wholly pleasurable emotion that had prompted his declaration passed, and he was confronted by the conviction that genuine feeling had no place in his motive, that he was not in the least in love with the woman.

Returning abruptly to his senses, he felt, moreover

a fool. He realised next, the instant necessity for pre-
tence. Even though he entertained it not, he must
assume desire. A recollection of Maisie's false accept-
ance of his protestations spurred him to action. He
laid an arm tenderly round Pia's shoulder.

"Oh, don't cry, my dearest," he said.

Her agitation stirred him to genuine distress.

"My dearest!" he repeated gently and soothingly,
"my dearest!"

She lifted her head at last, and regarded him with
streaming eyes. "What a fool I am!" she murmured
weakly—"what a terrible fool!"

He drew her into his arms.

"Pia, will you marry me?"

"Yes," she said; "yes—yes—yes—God knows—how
I love you!"

He stooped and kissed her on the lips.

She returned his embrace, clinging to him.

He wondered to feel once more within him a thrill of
perfect emotion, in tasting such happiness as he had
never known—in knowing that she was more to him
than any other woman in the world. Immediately
afterwards he experienced the sensation of mental and
physical collapse. In his system, it was exactly as
though a tight-drawn cord had suddenly snapped.

His senses swam. An icy coldness crept over his
limbs. The pain in his head grew unendurable. He
clutched at the back of a chair.

Out of an enveloping darkness he heard Pia's voice.

"Toby—are you ill? Toby!"

She stood very close to him, and touched his face
with her finger-tips. In the contact there was for him
something extraordinarily soothing, healing, peace-
giving. He held her tightly.

"It's only—" he said slowly, and with apparent
difficulty, "it's only—that I'm so—damn glad."

She laughed.

"Oh, so am I," she whispered. "My man—my
man"

There was a little silence. Then she continued, speak-

ing low : " You really care ? . . . And I've nearly died—wanting to know it. Years ago it was different. We weren't the same people, were we ? But, still, I believe you liked me then, too, didn't you ? It's good to remember. And since you came back—how long have you cared ? Oh, why didn't you speak before ? Didn't you know . . . Toby, I threw away self-respect—to show you, and to know I'd done that was torture. Yet I couldn't help doing it again. You can't know what was in my heart, nor how I've felt lately—that nothing has been worth while. I've allowed myself to sink . . . because I thought you didn't care. But now—now."

He saw her face, transformed.

" Why, how beautiful you are ! " he exclaimed.

Later, while they sat together in the shadows of the room, neither spoke much. Only from her, there were occasional whispers.

" I didn't know it was possible to be so happy. . . . Oh, my dear, how have I lived without you ? Toby, you'll take me away, won't you, from this life, to something bigger, and freer and better ? Oh, don't you wish we were the only people in all the world—you and I ? . . . "

Hawe remained, scarcely moving or speaking, and sensible only of an absolute disinclination for action of any kind. He felt, besides, desperately tired. His limbs seemed to be weighted. His mind held alone a desire for rest. So dazed was his intelligence, in fact, that it appeared to him not only possible but pleasant to allow an insidious, drowsy unconsciousness of all things to creep upon him.

He wanted, above all things, to go to sleep.

His head burned and ached ; his lips were dry ; in his ears there was an insistent, not unpleasant, buzzing sound as of distant machinery. Slumber offered itself like a cool stream, wherein he might bathe and wallow and drown and lose all sense. . . . Suddenly, he yawned widely. Actuated by a purely physical impulse, he extended his arms above his head and stretched and stretched. . . . After the exertion, he sat huddled limply

on the sofa beside Pia. His hands hung over his knees.

The nature of the subsequent silence held a subtle alteration.

Presently the woman spoke.

"You're tired, Toby." Her tone was full of a forced reserve. She leant forward, and her eyes were fixed on the man's hands, across which there shone a gleam of firelight. Her own fingers were tightly interlaced.

After a moment, trying to laugh, "Toby," she ventured, "that bracelet you wear—on your wrist—I've only just noticed it. Do you mind my asking? You used not to have it. Did someone give it you? . . . There, forgive me. I'm only a woman, and I'm silly—jealous. I love you——"

Her voice dropped and shook.

She touched his hand, fingering a narrow gold curb that encircled the wrist.

"Please tell me," she said, "please tell me—please tell me."

Hawe yawned again with an arm to his mouth. Then he turned to Pia. He wished she wouldn't ask questions. It was a bore, and he didn't understand.

"What?" he said. "What d'you say?"

She still fidgeted with the trinket.

Hawe glanced at his own wrist. His gaze remained riveted. A crowd of torturing recollections invaded his mind, ousting every other thought. He forgot Pia and the present. He remembered only Maisie and the past.

"She behaved abominably," he muttered, "abominably."

He slowly turned the bracelet round and round.

Mrs. Hamlyn leant back against the sofa cushions.

Presently, Hawe continued—

"Suppose I ought to send it back, oughtn't I? She—she didn't play the game—To carry on with Brassy—To chuck me for him."

He rose abruptly to his feet, with an exclamation of extreme irritation.

Directly he stood, the room appeared to revolve. He gripped the end of the sofa and put a hand to his head. "I tell you," he repeated thickly, "she behaved abominably—to tell a chap you care, and then to chuck him out. Not for any reason either, but just for fun. For fun, by Heaven!"

He took a few steps forward, then sat down again on the arm of the nearest chair and laughed a little.

"My head," he murmured. "I believe it's on fire inside."

Pia moved restlessly in her seat, and finally leant forward. Her fingers plucked at a fold of her dress. When she spoke her tone was sharp and high.

"What are you talking about? I don't understand. That bracelet. I want to know. Am I unreasonable. . . .?"

She attempted a laugh.

"Toby, please tell me; please tell me."

"Oh, yes," said Hawe, and recommenced fidgeting with Maisie's ornament.

There was a pause.

"She gave it me," he continued, meditatively. "It belonged to her. She fastened it on my hand and I gave her another. The first link, she called it, the first link!"

His voice grew lower; he began to mutter to himself.

Pia sat perfectly still.

"I don't understand," she repeated slowly. "Who was she? What was her name? Did you care for her?"

A sudden quick sound, almost like an angry sob, broke from the man. He was once more on his feet. Crossing the room, he leant his back against the mantelpiece. His shoulders were bowed.

"Care?" he said; "I should think I did care; and she—she treated me abominably—we were engaged—she promised—though she tried to hedge—it was in the summer."

"The summer," echoed Pia faintly.

"In August—over there where we were staying; and

all the time I never guessed she was playing the same game with Brassy. Brassy. . . . If you could see him, the little stinking cad ! ”

“ What are you saying ? ” whispered Mrs. Hamlyn. “ What are you saying ? I don’t understand. Please tell me.”

She pressed her fingers to her forehead.

“ It was like this,” returned Hawe quickly, almost eagerly, oblivious of the present situation, desirous only to confide his sense of injury to a sympathetic listener. “ We were engaged, though she wanted only to call it an understanding because of Jim, she said ; you know, Jim Reesdale that I told you about, the chap that was smashed up in the accident, the chap I diddled, my predecessor in her affections.”

He choked, and turned away his head. Standing now with his back to Pia, who did not speak, he leant an elbow on the mantelpiece, and his cheek on his hand.

Presently he continued, “ Then, just the other day, how long ago, was it ? I can’t remember. . . . When I came back, I went to see her, but there was only Cecilia—Cecilia’s her sister, you see—and there was the devil of a row—the devil of a row. And she told me how I’d been fooled.”

Another silence, broken only by Hawe’s quick breathing.

Pia never spoke.

The room was nearly dark. The firelight illumined one side of the man’s figure redly. Grotesque shadows danced against the walls and ceiling.

Abruptly, with another burst of passion, Hawe added, “ Damn all women’s tricks, damn all their silly kickshaws ! ”

He snatched at the bracelet on his wrist. . . . There was a slight clinking sound, as he threw the slender chain away from him on to the floor.

He dug his hands into his pockets and once more muttered to himself. Disjointed words were audible.

“ Her letter—the last straw. At least, Cecilia didn’t lie. The infernal little sneak ! Sorry—and the deuce of

a word of the truth—or Brassy. . . . But I guess I'll have paid her—the same coin. The proof I didn't care—when we're married—quietly married. All along—I was fooling too—only in earnest with Pia. . . . There's what I told her ! ”

Still Pia never spoke.

Hawe lifted his head and moved it restlessly. His fingers were at his collar.

“It's frightfully hot in here,” he said.

The quality of his tone had altered and grown more natural. At the same time, he spoke rather quickly and snatchily.

“A chap can hardly breathe,” he added. “Silly to have such big fires.”

He moved away from the hearth, and stood in the centre of the room. Quite suddenly, he seemed to become aware of the woman's motionless seated figure.

“Oh——” he said, “d'you mind—I think I'll go out for a turn ? ”

And still Pia never spoke.

He took a few more steps, and reached the door. Then, as he touched the handle, he turned with a little laugh.

“What a fool I am ! ” he said. “D'you know what I imagined ? I thought I was at home. I'd forgotten——” He broke off ; then, after a moment, “Seems most as though I were fuddled,” he said. “I can't remember anything. My head's bad. That's it. You know how it makes one feel. But there was something I wanted to tell you. I can't remember. It won't come back. Ah, well, next time. See you to-morrow, shan't I ? You don't mind my leaving now ? ”

He opened the door, but, before passing through it, paused, as though in perplexity.

“I wish I could remember what it was I had to tell you. . . . I'll think of it when I'm gone—sure. It's funny. . . . Well ! So long.”

A woman sat crouched on the sofa in a curious attitude: her knees drawn up, her head bent down against a cushion, at which, as though in an extremity of bodily anguish, she bit and tore.

CHAPTER IX.

It was after noon on the following day, when Hawe's landlady knocked at the bedroom door, for the purpose of rousing him from his late slumber.

The maid-servant of the establishment had reported that, when she had taken his shaving water, the lodger had been sleeping soundly, a fact by itself insignificant, but, taken in conjunction with a consideration of Hawe's matutinal habits, unusual.

The girl had besides been surprised to observe that the gentleman appeared, as she expressed it, "ter 'ave gone ter bed outside o' the clo'es, with everythink on, 'ceptin' one boot, and 'is coat. An' the winder wide hopen and the wind blowin' in, fit ter mike yer shiver."

The mind of the landlady, who was called Mrs. Croker, tended naturally towards anxiety. Having in her salad days fulfilled the post of lady's-maid, she was also of a protective disposition. She suffered keenly in fearing ill-health for her lodger.

"If the gentleman was to catch cold—" she said.

After three hours' consideration of the question, she went up to Hawe's room to shut the window. As there was no response to her summoning knock, she opened the door and entered. A cold draught of air rushed to welcome her. The door slammed. The figure on the bed stirred—the man raised himself on his elbow and stared at her.

"Eh?" he said sharply—"Eh? . . . Eh, what? . . ."

"I beg your pardon, sir, but it's near one o'clock," said Mrs. Croker.

"Oh, yes," said Hawe.

His head dropped back against the rumpled pillow. He lay sprawled on the bed, with an arm flung upwards. Mrs. Croker regarded him anxiously. In the man's

whole aspect, there was something rather repellent—rather strange. A shadow seemed to lie across his face. His hair, that stood all on end, appeared extraordinarily lifeless. His eyes were narrowed. There was a deep indentation at either side of his mouth, and his lips were dark, grossly swollen, and tightly compressed.

Mrs. Croker experienced sudden dread and a desire to fly. Restraining herself, she hazarded a question—“Aren't you feeling very well, sir?”

There was no answer.

“Perhaps you would like your breakfast in here, sir.”

“No—oh, no, thanks.” He moved restlessly. “The light,” he muttered—“The light—my head.”

She bustled to the window and drew down the sash. It closed with a creaking sound and a bang. Then she lowered the blind. “You'll feel like keeping still a while, sir, won't you? Does your head pain you? I know what that is—suffering awful myself from neuralgia and the face-ache.”

As she talked, she moved about the room, picking up a coat from the floor, setting straight a chair, drawing a curtain. “I'll bring you up a cup of tea myself, sir. That'll set you right. And will you take anything—a bit of toast, now, dry—or perhaps you might fancy an egg?”

She paused by the bedside, and regarded him inquiringly.

“No, thanks.”

“You do look poorly, now,” she continued. “Can't I get you anything, sir? There was some medicine that a lady give me once . . . little pills—it is, quite agreeable to take—phenastyin they call it. It always does me good. Perhaps, if you——”

Hawe closed his eyes, and a crease came between the brows.

“Maybe you've caught cold,” flowed on the feminine voice, “lying with your window open all night, and not a stitch of covering but your shirt-sleeves.”

As Mrs. Croker warmed to her discourse, she grew somewhat involved.

"Small wonder," she added; "and I've known a cold got like that to be the death of some. There was my poor cousin's husband, who——"

Hawe turned on his side with a little gasp of exasperation.

Yet as the conversation rambled cheerfully on of lingering illness and funerals, he found himself listening with a kind of fascination.

"He being only in his twenty-third year," concluded the landlady at last, "and extraordinarily like you, sir, begging your pardon, specially when he came near his last days."

Hawe once more raised himself, and gazed at the speaker.

"You're talking through your hat," he observed, drawling his speech, from sheer disinclination for utterance. "Never was sick—in my life—I suppose a fella's head can ache. . . . I'll be right 'nough soon."

"But——" protested Mrs. Croker, in a tone of distress.

Hawe clutched at the bed-clothes.

"Oh, go to——go downstairs, and tell it to your husband's cousin," he said faintly.

"Sir?" said the landlady, mildly interrogative.

As he dropped back, with an arm across his eyes, and vouchsafed no further explanation, she added: "I'll send you up a cup of tea, sir. I hope you'll be feeling better by-and-by."

She retreated, closing the door behind her insecurely so that it flew open, and continued thereafter to swing to and fro in the draught. Every few moments the latch clicked against the fastening, and the hinges creaked.

The man lay and suffered the most exquisite torment, to which he felt quite incapable of putting an end.

Whenever the door swung close, he imagined and hoped wildly that the latch would slip securely into place. Whenever his desire was frustrated, he experienced an increasing despair. At last, a certain fancy took possession of his mind. He imagined that as the

door stood ajar, the tall slight figure of a woman stood in the entrance. She crossed the threshold, and shut the door behind her firmly. Then she advanced to the bedside, moving noiselessly and quickly. He looked up and knew her as Pia Hamlyn. At once, over his whole being there stole an extraordinary sense of satisfaction and peace. In the next moment the latch clicked against the fastening. He opened his eyes with a start and a smothered oath. The illusion had passed. Presently, however, it returned. He imagined further that Mrs. Hamlyn sat beside him, and clasped in her cool palm one of his burning hands. He was even peculiarly conscious of the soft impress of her palm, and found the contact excellently soothing. He turned his head to regard her, and she was not there, though his own arm lay outstretched over the edge of the bed. . . . And once more the latch clicked against the fastening.

Through the succeeding hours, intermittently unconscious, he alternated thus between hallucinations and realities. Gradually his fancies grew freer and more frequent. He thought that he conversed with Pia. In his waking moments he even heard his own voice raised in altercation, and experienced a dull surprise at realising that no second person was present. Once or twice it also occurred to him that he had been talking nonsense. He became in one instant abruptly aware of stating that Pia must be mad to contemplate riding out alone, on a buck-jumping motor.

"You don't know the way to manage," he found himself saying anxiously. "There's a trick of buckling the stirrups together underneath the belly, so's they can't swing out. Then—if you sit well down and back——"

After a time he became oppressed by a raging thirst. He fancied now that Mrs. Hamlyn came and gave him to drink, holding a cup of some cold refreshing beverage to his lips, and supporting his head on her arm.

This new torment grew to such intensity that at last it was impossible to lose the sense of it. He

tossed to and fro and groaned. Next he knew that he must obtain water or go mad. Actuated by the strength of desire, he struggled to a sitting posture. Then he looked round the room. The washing-stand was in the far corner; there he might put his lips to the jug and drink—and drink. His gaze returned to the bedside. Suddenly he realised that a chair, on which stood a cup and saucer, had been placed within reach of his hand. The cup was filled with weak tea. A moment later he was gulping it feverishly. It was tepid and strongly sweetened. The dregs tasted curiously bitter. Refreshed, but not satisfied, Hawe started to carry out his original intention. As he stood upright the floor seemed to sway beneath his feet.

“Steady on!” he said, and laughed a little.

His progress across the room was slow and erratic. At the end, he managed to pour water into the basin. Then he ducked his whole head, and drank and spluttered.

On this, there followed renewed giddiness, so overpowering that, with dripping face, he could only stagger to the nearest chair. He began to wonder what was the matter.

“I never was sick in my life. Is this how it feels? Perhaps if I lie down a bit longer—”

As he threw himself once more on the bed, he began to shiver. Over him there stole a horrible depression, swamping vitality. Weakness stole on him insidiously, like an enemy. With a dull resentment, he was conscious of its approach. He lay perfectly still, and sensed the irregular and feeble beating of his heart.

In the meanwhile, Mrs. Croker, the landlady, congratulated herself on her judgment in having dissolved fifteen grains of phenacetin in the cup of tea that had been carried to Hawe’s room.

“Men,” she observed, “are so contrary about physic.”

The hours passed, and the autumn day waned to twilight. To Hawe, lying in the shadowed room, there had come a fresh craving, whose force increased with

every moment. He longed consumingly for the presence of Mrs. Hamlyn. He shut his eyes and tried to realise again the pleasant fancies, that had lately visited his fevered brain. But all his efforts were unavailing. To his memory he could not even exactly recall the contour of her face and form. And that which he most desired, the sense of her touch, the contact of her hand with his own, eluded entirely his imagination. He lay and stared into a dark corner of the room, hoping against hope for the return of some vision. His flesh and spirit united in a voiceless cry—the repetition of her name. He suffered a greater distress than thirst, an intenser agony than hunger. He required the presence of this one woman more than anything else in life. If only she would approach he could find healing, strength, satisfaction.

In his mind there was no thought or recollection of other persons. His instinct was dominant.

As the girl, whom he had loved for her limitations, had appealed only to fostered self-sufficiency, so now the woman appealed to primitive inclination.

Hawe was brought face to face with the realisation that Pia Hamlyn was to him as the first woman to the first man.

Without her he must die. Therefore he must go to her.

Mrs. Croker, entering her lodger's room to enquire after his health, discovered him clinging to the bed-post and endeavouring simultaneously to put on a coat. When he saw her he smiled rather foolishly.

"I thought I'd get up," he remarked.

"And how are you feeling, sir?"

"Oh, all right. I'm going out. Could you give me a hand with this? Thanks, awfully. Yes, I guess I'll sit down a bit." In the chair his whole body drooped heavily forward.

Mrs. Croker's fears returned.

"You're never going out this evening, sir?" she said.

"I'll be right 'nough soon," murmured Hawe; "right 'nough soon."

"And you've eat nothing the whole blessed day. Let me bring you something—now do, sir."

He looked up and smiled again. "You're awfully good. I 'spect a brandy-and-soda would pick me up, some."

She departed and returned after a longish absence with a tray, bearing a plate of sandwiches besides a syphon, decanter, and tumbler.

Hawe was in the same position. Only his exhaustion seemed increased. He had succeeded in putting on his boots. Streams of perspiration ran down his face. Mrs. Croker was sufficiently alarmed by his condition to act with promptitude. She poured brandy into the glass and gave it to him. Revived, he stood and mixed a strong drink. The hand in which he held the tumbler shook so violently that as he raised it to his lips half the liquor was spilt on his clothes. He proceeded to make for the door.

"You're *never* going out this evening?" repeated Mrs. Croker anxiously.

He paused and regarded her.

"I've got to go to her," he said. "I can't do without her."

"Sir!" said Mrs. Croker.

As he retreated she made a second appeal.

"Couldn't you fancy a sandwich, sir? They're ham. I cut them myself."

He took no notice, but began to descend the stairs, leaning often for support against the banister rail. From above, in impotent distress, she watched his progress. He reached the hall and she heard him fumble with the latch. Dread of some unknown catastrophe gripped her intelligence. She ran down a few steps and leant over the banisters. "Oh, sir," she called; "sir, you're never going out this evening?"

Bareheaded, Hawe stood beneath the lamp that hung over the entrance. He looked up at her, and she remarked in his expression an indomitable purpose.

The next instant he had passed out into the street.

A cab went by. Hawe held up his hand. He

dragged himself on to the step, and held to the splash-board. "Go to 79B, Sloane Street," he said in a clear voice, "and drive like the devil!"

Then he fell into the seat.

A fine cold rain was blown in on him, by gusts of wind. He roused himself to turn up the collar of his coat.

The drive was like a nightmare. All the sounds of the streets—the roar of the traffic, the clamour of the world—were as the collective din of an Inferno.

Crowding vehicles and hurrying pedestrians seemed like opposing and malignant forces, that stood in the way of his object, and impeded the haste of his advance. All impressions were grotesquely magnified.

Moments were years, till the cab drew up to the kerb before Mrs. Hamlyn's house. Hawe scrambled to the pavement, and tottered as he stood. He advanced and pressed his finger on the bell, leaning against the door. Almost at once it was opened, and he entered precipitately. The bland face of the man-servant expressed the utmost astonishment. After a minute's scrutiny of the visitor's dishevelled person, he asked judicially—"What do you want?"

Hawe rested his shoulders against the wall, and panted as though he had been running. His eyes were half-closed.

The man-servant grew emphatic. "Look here," he repeated, "what do you want?"

Hawe lifted his head. He knew the butler of old.

"Mrs. Hamlyn," he whispered. "Le' me see her—I want t'see—Mrs. Hamlyn, Pranksome."

Pranksome stared—then ejaculated Hawe's name. "Beg pardon, sir. Yessir," he added.

The visitor moved towards the staircase.

"Where's Mrs. Hamlyn—I want t'see—Mrs. Hamlyn," he reiterated.

With a desperate effort, he ascended the first steps. Pranksome hastened to his aid. They passed into the drawing-room. Hawe sank into an armchair.

"I'm a'right," he muttered—"only—I want her—

jus' t' come and hold my hand. That's all! I guess—after all—I mus' be a little sick."

He again closed his eyes.

By force of habit Pranksome repeated "Yessir," and left the room.

Beneath a placid exterior, however, he hid extreme bewilderment and the complete failure of customary resourcefulness. Thus, meeting his mistress on the stairs, he could only give the information—

"There is a gentleman to see you in the drawing-room, madam," without further detail.

Pia appeared to be dressed for a journey. She wore a tweed coat and skirt and a hat, and carried over one arm an extra wrap.

"All right," she replied slowly. "I'm expecting him. Oh, and—Pranksome, you can take the portmanteau that's in my room downstairs."

As the butler departed to obey her order, she stood irresolutely on the landing outside the drawing-room door, and seemed to prepare her mind for an ordeal. After some moments she entered the apartment quickly.

"I didn't think you'd come so early, Peter," she said, as she advanced. "It's not time to start; and, besides——"

She stopped abruptly, and remained in the centre of the room, staring at the seated figure of the man.

Hawe made no attempt to rise. Only, without speaking, he smiled faintly and held out his hand.

She put her fingers to the collar of her dress as though she were choking. Her lips moved, but no words came.

Presently, with an effort, Hawe spoke.

"I'm so glad—you've come—I wanted you so."

She caught her breath, and the cloak slipped from her arm to the floor. Then, suddenly, she began to laugh, at first softly, but with growing violence. Her mirth was immoderate—hysterical. Between gasps of laughter—"I'm afraid—I don't understand," she said—"Oh, but how ludicrous—ludicrous. Excuse me."

She wiped her eyes and seemed to struggle for self-control. She gazed at Hawe from beneath drooping lids. Her mouth smiled widely—her breast still heaved.

"Please forgive my amusement," she added. "If you could realise the absurdity——"

She broke off with a fresh peal of laughter, throwing her head back against the cushion, and clutching the arms of the chair.

Hawe leaned towards her, and spoke her name in a tone of sharp distress.

Without changing her attitude, she glanced towards him.

"Yes," she answered.

"Is it Pia?" he said, with an inflection of sudden doubt. . . . He stared at her—"Who are you?" he added; and then, "I want t'see—Mrs. Hamlyn—Mrs. Ham——"

His voice failed; his head dropped back.

The woman's laughter was suddenly stilled.

"My name is Mrs. Hamlyn," she stated.

There was a pause.

Then she rose, and crossing the room, stood with a hand on the mantelpiece, and regarded the man.

"What's the matter?" she said quickly. "What's the matter? . . . Why do you look like that?"

She bent and laid her hands lightly across one of his wrists, then snatched away her fingers, as though the contact burned her.

"What's the matter?" she repeated sharply.

"After all—it's you," whispered Hawe, gazing at her. "You touched me." His face took on an expression of ineffable content.

She turned away her head.

"I think," she said presently, in a low voice that quivered, "I think you must be either mad—or drunk. Otherwise you would not have come here."

He made no answer.

"Will you go?" she added, without looking at him.

He remained silent.

Her shoulders, as she stood with her back towards him, were bowed. Her head drooped lower and lower. Abruptly she wheeled round and faced him again, her hands clenched by her sides.

"Oh, good God!" she exclaimed passionately. "What made you come? How could you—how could you?" She sobbed once, and made a few paces to and fro.

Hawe stirred in his seat, and holding the arm of the chair, pulled himself forward.

After a little silence, he said faintly, "Why do you wear a hat? You hadn't it on the other day when you came to see me."

She lifted her head and met his regard.

"I don't like it," he added, querulously critical. "I can't see your hair properly."

For a moment longer she stared at him, then advanced once more to the fireplace and looked into the glowing coals.

"I am going out—away," she said vaguely. "I am ready to start. You inconvenience me by remaining here."

"Oh, no," he returned quickly. "No, no, no. Don't go yet. If you leave me—the door'll keep swinging—and never shut, and I can't bear it." His tone was vehemently distressed.

Pia glanced round at him.

"You don't know what you are saying. I think you are intoxicated. Please go."

He did not alter his attitude.

"You're different—some," he murmured. "Just now you were kind."

His voice sounded puzzled.

"I know," he added. "It's the hat that's changed you so."

She threw back her head and faced him again, with sullen, furious eyes and quivering mouth.

"Have you no sense? Have you no sort of shame?" she said. "If you aren't quite besotted, I'd like you to listen and understand. . . . To-night, I go away with

Peter—Mr. Wyngate. We shall cross from Dover to Calais by the night mail, and journey on to Paris. We arranged it this morning. I wrote yesterday and told him to come and see me. I said I'd learnt at last that nothing's worth while, except Love—with a capital L."

She laughed softly, like a madwoman. "So we're going to the devil together—good travelling companions. D'you see—d'you see?"

"You and I?" said Hawe. "Why, that's good. I told you—t' would be foolishness—to go alone." He spoke slowly, striving with all his might to collect his scattered thoughts.

"But not yet," he added, "not just yet. I'm so awfully tired."

"Are you jeering at me?" said Mrs. Hamlyn. "Have you come here to laugh? . . . Oh, I wish I could kill you—I hate you so. I believe you are a fiend." She stood glaring at him murderously. "I can't kill you because I don't know how. I can only curse you in my heart. You set yourself to fool me—didn't you—so that you might prove my gullibility! I gave myself away quite nicely—didn't I?—for the second time—the second time. And you were drunk, and I did not realise it, until, not knowing what you said, you showed me all your motive—pique, wounded self-esteem—the intention to make use of me. . . . Oh! God!"

She hid her face in her hands and rocked her body to and fro.

Hawe's expression was bewildered.

"Will you leave me?" cried Mrs. Hamlyn frantically.

"I?" he said. "D'you want me to go? But—I've only jus' come. I wanted to see you—awfully."

Intense weakness slurred his utterance. His gaze remained constantly fixed on Pia. "There was something I wanted t' tell you—t' explain——"

The woman cut him short.

"I don't wish to hear. There can be no explanations. Why will you not go?"

"You wouldn't come t' me," said Hawe. "I waited

—ages. Only a' first you were there—and I guess that mus' have been a dream; 't was so pleasant."

He frowned and bit his lip.

Mrs. Hamlyn's agitation grew more and more manifest.

"Here—it's all different," he continued; "and I don't understan'. I b'lieve—aren't we indoors? Say, Pia, why *do* you wear a hat?"

She gave a great gasp, and pressed her hands to her head. Then, impulsively, she crossed the hearth, and pushed her finger against the button of the electric bell. She looked over her shoulder at Hawe. Her face was scarcely recognisable.

"I am ringing for Pranksone to turn you out, as you won't go."

"But," said Hawe faintly, "but, I haven't told why I came. There's something I want t' explain——" He clenched and unclenched his hands, resorting to physical effort as an aid to the endeavour to gain control over his mental faculties. "I had t' come," he went on, "'cause I can't do without you. I want you—don' you see? Oh, if only you'd jus' put your hand in mine a while. Won' you?"

His face worked. Towards her he stretched out his open palm.

"I love you—like mad," he whispered. "I've loved you—right 'long—since creation. Only, I never knew before——"

Pia turned towards him, with a sudden gesture of entreaty. A little moan escaped her.

"Ah, my beloved," breathed Hawe; "my beloved," and pulled himself to his feet. Thus for a second he remained, with arms outheld. Then his body swayed, and he fell heavily, his shoulders and head striking the seat of the chair from which he had arisen.

The admirable Pranksome arrived to find a distracted woman kneeling beside a semi-conscious man, who lay and babbled deliriously. She essayed to support Hawe's head on her arm, and speechlessly lifted eyes, wide with fear, to the butler's face.

Pranksome dragged Hawe to the couch.

"He is ill," said Pia, dazedly; "he is ill. A doctor—quick—telephone!"

"The silly floor," murmured the sick man. "How can a fella stand up when it slips away? It's spring—that's why—the ice going out. Where's Pia? Tell her to come an' see. Where's she gone? I don't believe it—without wishing me luck. Pia—Hello! Pia."

His voice rose. He attempted to sit up.

She came and crouched beside him, and clasped his fingers. He lay back, appearing suddenly and wonderfully soothed.

"Your dear hand!" he said.

There was silence.

Pranksome returning, made suggestions. Mrs. Hamlyn shook her head, and he stole from the room.

Somewhere a clock chimed.

At last—a step on the stairs: the arrival of a medical man, alert, business-like, and slightly known to Pia. He had that professional air, which at once inspires confidence and reduces the aspect of abnormal events to a level of commonplace. A person impossible to imagine surprised.

Of Hawe he made a lengthy examination. Then he gave a concise diagnosis.

"Typhoid fever of two or three days' development. There is as well some heart complication." He quoted technical Latin terms.

Pia searched his face with straining eyes.

"The general condition is low," he added tersely.

Mrs. Hamlyn spoke inaudibly.

"I understand that your friend knocked under while visiting you to-day," proceeded the practitioner. "An unfortunate occurrence."

"Yes."

"A fair constitution, I suppose; do you happen to know? Ah, well—we will move him, as soon as possible, to the nearest hospital. In such cases, everything depends on the nursing. I will arrange for an ambulance——"

Hawe's voice broke in on the words.

"I never knew that 't was you I wanted so all 'long. I always thought women weren't much 'count—all 'like. Now—Oh, Pia——"

She had advanced to his side.

"Bend over me," he said. He looked up at her, and spoke quite rationally.

"I worship you with my body and soul," he said, "Do you love me?"

"Yes," said Pia.

He gave a little sigh and closed his eyes.

The medical man continued to talk. She turned to him at last, with tears running down her cheeks.

"Thank you very much," she said; "but my friend Mr. Hawe will remain here in my house. I shall nurse him."

While she spoke, she lifted her hands to her head, took off her hat, and laid it on a chair.

The doctor coughed. "Ahem! Oh, of course—if you are prepared to meet the inconveniences. All the same, I would suggest that you would have a professional nurse, or even two."

"One—if you insist."

"My dear lady, if it were a matter of insistence, I should——" He paused and eyed her. "I ought to warn you that the case is grave," he added brusquely.

She appeared to brace herself to meet an enemy. To his statement she made no reply.

He remarked her attitude, but refused to speak any word of encouragement or hope.

Presently he asked for writing materials, and indited a prescription. She heard the scratching of the pen on paper and felt sick with fear.

She wanted to grovel at his feet, and entreat him, shrieking, to say that Hawe would live.

He finished and rose from the table and took up his hat.

"If you like," he said, "I will leave these instructions at the nearest chemist's, and tell them to send the stuff round immediately. In the meanwhile, give the

patient beef tea or Benger, with brandy in it. I will send you a nurse this evening, and will look in again later. I think that is all. Thanks. Good evening." He bowed.

Mrs. Hamlyn could not speak.

At the door he paused, cleared his throat, and looked round at her rather furtively.

"There's a certain Latin motto," he snapped, "*Amor morte fortior*," or some such nonsense. D'you happen ever to have heard it?" On the last word he retreated in haste.

As he reached the hall, an incident of a somewhat baffling character forced itself upon his notice.

The front door was opened by Pranksome the butler in answer to the summons of a tall, dark man, dressed in tweeds, who stood without. A hansom, with a gladstone bag on the roof, was drawn up to the kerb. The doctor, standing for a moment aside in the passage, heard the stranger ask for Mrs. Hamlyn.

"Mrs. Hamlyn is not at home, sir," said Pranksome glibly.

"Oh, that's all right, she'll see me; she's expecting me," said the new arrival, and advanced a step.

"I beg your pardon, sir," said Pranksome. "I regret to say that Mrs. Hamlyn has been took extremely unwell, sir—sudden."

"Ill? Good heavens! What's the matter?"

Pranksome did not hesitate.

"We cannot exactly tell yet, sir. Only she has been took very bad with pains in the head and sickness."

At this juncture the medical man passed out on to the step and entered his waiting brougham. As he drove away, Pranksome appeared to indicate the departing carriage and to continue his explanations.

* * * * *

In the room above, Mrs. Hamlyn knelt in the posture of prayer. Her face was hidden in her clasped hands, and her arms were thrown across the man's body.

He opened his eyes suddenly and regarded her. Then, with his fingers, he touched her hair.

"You've taken off your hat," he whispered. "I'm glad."

She raised her head and met his gaze.

"Oh, d'you know how I love you?" he said, and clung to her weakly.

She held him in a strong embrace, supporting his shoulders.

Gradually his head fell back. His eyelids drooped. His limbs relaxed. His whole aspect was that of one who rests after a long day's work.

And Pia continued to look down into his face.

Her own expressed an enigma.

Only, in her eyes, doubt was paramount.

CHAPTER X.

HALF-PAST eight on an April morning.

The scene, fairyland, which may be found by all who have eyes to see and ears to hear and sense to understand the true beauty of an English spring.

In a Surrey pinewood on this particular young day, life, quickened by the mystery of birth, reigned supreme. The air, curiously still and very cold, held an indefinable suggestion of the resurrection from the dead.

Through the blue-shadowed aisles of the wood, between the slim trunks of the trees, that stood like pillars in some wonderful temple of God, there was wafted as incense, the ineffable fresh scent of new existence. From the ground rose the pungent, pleasant odour of the pine-needles and a lingering smell of decaying leaves. But overlying these was that other indescribable, subtle, and complex scent of the spring. Resinous and sweet and health-giving, it pervaded the air with a sense of the eternity of youth and the endlessness of life.

Overhead, through the canopy of green, the sky showed glimpses of a faint exquisite blue. Across the pale emerald of the budding larches, that began to hang out their dainty tassels as though for a *fete*-day, and athwart the more sombre-toned foliage of the pines, drifted the vivid sunlight that held no warmth, but as it struck on leafless brambles and bare ground, forming a mosaic of gold and brown, brought encouragement to the rising sap and hope to the earth.

And besides the colour and scent of Life, the sound of it stirred most wonderfully and ceaselessly in the wood.

Birds called to one another from the branches of the trees. Overhead all was flutter and excitement in the new nests.

The undergrowth rustled to the passing of its furred or feathered denizens. The place was like a busy township, where all the inhabitants are betimes astir to go about their varying occupations: some to work, and some to play; some to gain a breakfast, some to woo a lady, some to tend a family. Here was love-making, and here was domesticity; here they quarrelled and fought or lived in peace and amity according to circumstance; here in their republic, they abided by the naturally existent laws of the woodland. But in their keeping of these laws they showed discrimination. Recognising man as a natural enemy, the order in his presence was always "to lie low"; yet on this morning, as one passed through the wood, their movements and conversation were not abated. The word passed, "A man, but all's well. He means no harm. He has no dog with him."

So Sidney Hawe came down the winding path, and the sound of his footfalls was deadened by the carpet of pine-needles on which he trod. Characteristically, his hands were thrust into the pockets of the grey tweed coat he wore, his felt hat was pushed to the back of his head, and as he walked he fitfully whistled a little tune. In six months his appearance and expression had undergone a marked change. For rather more than half that time, he had lain ill with typhoid fever at Mrs. Hamlyn's house in Sloane Street, and during those days he had come very near to Death. Once he had approached so close to the Borderland, that while his body had lain in the stillness of extreme and utter weakness, the man himself, the ego separated from the flesh, had moved consciously amid mysterious surroundings.

He had seemed to stand in a dark passage-way, through which, striking on the nakedness of his soul, there blew steadily an icy wind. At the end of the tunnel, he had seen a small round hole of light, and as he advanced towards it, the aperture grew in size and brilliance, till it blazed before him in an extraordinary circular whiteness. Then it was that his spirit had been arrested by a sound, that came from the darkness

behind him. He had paused—vaguely troubled. There, in the shadow, a woman had uttered his name, frantically, breathlessly, as though she had been running. He had listened; “Sidney, Sidney, for God’s sake don’t go; don’t leave me. My dear, my beloved, you must not. I want you.”

The going forward had seemed so easy, the turning back so hard; yet against his volition the magnetism of the appeal had held him, drawn him from the light back into the shades of night. Then, as he had followed the voice, he had come into a greyness as of a fog, and had grown sensible of an arm that clung round his shoulder, supporting his head, and a hand that clasped his own.

The contact had seemed strangely familiar, wonderfully electric. From it gradually a faint new current of strength had appeared to pass into his body, bringing a remembrance of the life he was leaving, and then a fresh desire to take up existence.

After a subsequent period of days, in which body and soul had been arrayed in a desperate fight against opposing forces that threatened to swamp vitality, he had opened his eyes at last on a world that held some interest. The room on which he had looked was flooded with winter sunshine, before which the fire that burned in the grate paled. For a time he had lain and watched the contrast between the slanting sunbeams and the flickering flames. Then, on the mantelpiece he had noticed the array of flowers, yellow and white and red. The scent of them had come to him pleasantly and brought contentment. Above the flowers hung a picture, a clever sketch in black and white of a horse’s head. At the sight of it an instinct had stirred within him, a dim memory of ranching days. Very slowly he had begun to think. Ideas had come to his mind, as it were, in words of one syllable. He had groped for them painfully like a child over a lesson.

“That is a horse, a good horse. If I could see it!—I would like that horse for my own, to ride. But one can’t see. . . .”

A sense of irritation had dawned on him, because the equine portrait stopped short at the neck. He wanted a picture of the horse as it stood—a full-sided picture; he wanted the beast itself; he wanted to get up and out and away for a ride.

He had tried thereupon to lift his head from the pillow, but the effort was quite beyond his strength. A realisation of impotence had flashed on him, and, in his humiliation, scalding tears had rushed to his eyes.

In the next moment Pia was bending over him, smiling tremulously, laying a cool hand on his forehead, murmuring little disjointed phrases of hope and comfort.

He had looked up into her face with anxious troubled eyes, and in a voice whose gruff whisper he was quite unable to control had spoken, "That horse looks a good 'un, but I can't tell from the head."

This was no delirium; the man's mind was obviously lucid, only troubled by physical weakness. Pia's sympathy was quicker than a mother's. She had glanced once quickly round the room, and by some freak of telepathy had noticed the picture above the fireplace, that faced the bed.

"Yes," she said quickly, "you're quite right. He was a very good horse. He used to belong to me a long time ago. He was a hunter. He got killed. One day I will show you another picture that gives a better idea of what he was like. Now, will you drink this to please me. Soon you will be stronger."

She held a cup of stimulant to his lips, and obediently he drank, with eyes still fixed on her face. Presently he had spoken again, hesitatingly, vaguely.

"You look—you look sad."

Then she had smiled once more, rather pitifully, and shaken her head.

"I am not sad now, dear."

"Sad," he persisted.

Later, she had knelt beside the bed, with hands clasped tightly on the edge of the coverlet. His slow gaze had travelled to the little bony interlaced fingers,

encircled now by no rings, and in his eyes there had dawned a tired smile.

"Your hand," he whispered. "I'd like—" Instantly, she had understood, and had slipped her palm within his own. His fingers had grasped it tightly. The lids had trembled and closed above his eyes, and the smile that had lain there came to his lips. Thus he had fallen into a sleep that lasted many hours.

And during those hours Pia Hamlyn had never moved her hand, nor stirred from her cramped kneeling posture beside the bed, lest the slightest alteration of her position should disturb the sleeper. Then, when the trained nurse had come to relieve her of her charge, and to rouse the patient to partake of liquid food, Pia, able at last to withdraw her numbed fingers, and to stagger to her feet, had nearly fainted.

But of this Hawe had known nothing.

Only looking back now on those weeks of illness, and the tedious following days of convalescence, he realised that Pia's nursing, Pia's love alone had been his salvation. She it was who, during the two occasions when he had suffered a relapse, had tended him night and day; she it was who, when his spirit had failed in the terrible contest against physical weakness, had imbued him with a fresh desire to live.

Practically she, and not he, had fought against Death and conquered.

So, as he came down through the busy pinewood on this young spring morning, his thoughts were all of Pia, and in his eyes, which a year ago had held only a self-sufficing knowledge of the world and some pain, there had dawned now a new expression, rather awe-struck, very happy. He had looked on a sacred thing—the miracle of a woman's devotion. Now, too, he knew himself as he had never done before, and in a knowledge of his dependence, in a realisation of the unwavering love he felt, had come a great satisfaction. The mouth beneath the straight reddish moustache was set more firmly now, in a little smile, quietly content. Traces of his illness lingered in the streaks of

grey that showed in his hair, in the faded tan of his skin and in the spareness of his figure, but the new strength that his mind had learnt overlay the marks of past suffering.

Now, his thoughts passed in swift review the after-events of his convalescence. Directly he had been able to move, Mrs. Hamlyn had arranged for him to travel with a trained nurse to the south of England. While Pia remained in London, he for six weeks had stayed at the quiet watering-place, awaiting the return of health and energy. Only twice in that time had she visited him, and though, in seeing her, he had experienced much pleasure, and a strong revival within him, of his old emotion, no talk of sentiment had passed between them. Once, brokenly, he had tried to thank her—to tell her what was in his heart, but abruptly she had cut short his words, and lightly had turned their conversation into a purely friendly channel.

At last the time had come when, practically restored to strength, he had felt overwhelmed by the desire to see her again. He had chafed long beneath the restrictions of the last stages of convalescence, and had even begun to feel a vague self-pity in knowing himself alone. He was contemplating a journey to London, and a visit to the house in Sloane Street, when he received a letter from Mrs. Hamlyn.

"I have given up my house in town," she had written, "and have taken a small cottage near Farnham, in Surrey. Cachou and I think we are cut out for the simple life. When you are tired of Torquay, you may come and look us up. You might even get a bed at the village inn. Meanwhile, of course, I can always supply you with a bone and a mat."

The next day had found Hawe installed at the village hostelry within a mile of Pia's cottage, and when they had met, she had invited him quite naturally to come to her for all his meals.

Her simple friendliness was a barrier to the expression of his feelings, and as he had lingered on in the place, seeing her perpetually, the barrier had grown rather

than diminished. They had seemed to drift into a brotherly and sisterly relation, that could by no possible means hold a vestige of sentiment. Yet, for his part, Hawe felt an increasing restlessness, and an actual necessity to speak the truth of what was in his mind.

At present, after a period of nearly four weeks, he had come to a decision.

His resolve was formed. He would ask Pia, on this very morning, when she would become his wife.

Passing down the needle strewn-path, he came, after a while, to the edge of the wood, which sloped to a wide road across a border of grass. Each little blade of turf was silvered with a light frost, that appeared like a fine powder of diamonds in the sunlight.

On a bush of blackthorn, heavy with blossom, a robin sat and piped shrill sweet music.

To Hawe the earth seemed a fairer place than any human conception of heaven.

Fronting him across the road, behind a little white gate, stood Mrs. Hamlyn's cottage—a true cottage this, placed in a miniature garden, with creepers covering its grey stone walls, and a roof of thatch shading its lattice windows.

Hawe crossed the road, and entered the little garden. A narrow path, paved with red tiles, led up to a porch of trellis work, and a small green front door, which boasted a quaint-shaped knocker and handle of wrought copper. On the other side of the path ran a border of brown earth, edged with a ribbon of gold and purple crocuses, behind which the tender blades of innumerable sprouting bulbs began to show. Beyond the borders, on each side, lay twin lawns of grass, encircled by flower-beds. Hawe paused to look up at the house. All the windows were open to the morning air. Through a lower casement he could look into a tiny dining-room, and could see a round table laid for breakfast, with spotless napery and shining silver.

Near the porch he stooped to the border, and turned over with his fingers the leaves of a clump of violet-plants that grew there. Beneath the foliage, he found

several flowers, but as he picked them, suddenly a voice from above caused him to look up quickly.

Pia Hamlyn stood leaning out of her bedroom window.

"Hullo, Toby!" she called. "Good morning. You're up early."

She smiled broadly down on him, as he straightened himself and snatched off his hat. This morning she appeared extraordinarily young and gay—almost girlish. Her heavy dark hair was parted above her forehead, and hung down over her shoulders. She wore a loose, frivolous-looking muslin jacket, and above the bunch of mauve ribbons with which it was tied at the throat, her neck rose in all the beauty of its creamy whiteness. A flush was on her cheeks, a laugh in the expressive green eyes that looked down on Hawe.

He gazed up at her for a few moments, without speaking or answering her greeting. Then, as no better words would come—

"I couldn't wait," he said slowly.

She laughed maliciously. "For your breakfast? What horrid greed! Now, I really am an energetic woman. I got up early this morning to wash my hair, and now I'm bored to tears because it won't dry quick enough."

Out of the window she waved a hair-brush towards him in an admonitory gesture.

"Toby," she continued with mock severity, "you've been picking my violets. You really are too bad. You know I like to pick them myself. You never get long enough stalks."

"Oh, but I did to-day," he returned. "Look," and he held up a flower for her to see. "I picked them for you, Pia. You ought to wear them with that—that fluffy thing you've got on. They'd match the ribbons."

"Goose!" was all the answer she vouchsafed, above a ripple of mirth.

"Not at all," he said. "I like you dressed like that and with your hair down your back. Say, please, will you come down to breakfast so?"

"My dear man!"

"Oh! but please." He took out his watch. "It's just on nine now, and I'm dying for my breakfast, and it would take a week for you to fix yourself differently, and you couldn't look nicer, Pia!"

"Couldn't I—you rudest thing on earth?"

"Oh, come along down, do, Pia."

"But my hair's sopping wet. I should catch cold and die."

"Well, I'll help you dry it, sure!"

They both laughed then, like two children.

"Oh! stop talking nonsense, and get along into the house, Toby," she said. "You might see if there are any signs of brekky being got ready. I'll be down in a minute."

"Honest Injun?"

"Honest Injun!"

Thereupon, he entered the cottage by the little green front door, and passing through the cosy hall came into the tiny dining-room. A large fire burned on a wide hearth at one side, but the room was chill from the open window. Hawe walked across and closed the leaded panes, then turning to the table, he placed his violets in a bunch on Pia's plate. A daily paper lay beside it, and now he took this up, and glanced through its contents, seeking relief from his thoughts. Presently a maid-servant entered the room with steaming dishes and plates.

Hawe waited with ill-concealed impatience.

At last there was the sound of a footstep on the stairs, and the silken rustle of petticoats.

Irresistibly there flashed across his mind a recollection of the day, nearly twelve months ago, when, after an interval of ten years, he had waited in the Sloane Street drawing-room to see Mrs. Hamlyn.

Now, dropping the newspaper, he stood in an attitude tensely expectant, with fingers grasping the back of one of the chairs that was drawn up to the breakfast-table, and eyes fixed on the open doorway.

She entered the room swiftly, moving with that

peculiar drooping pose of the body that he remembered so well.

She was wearing the little muslin jacket that he had admired at the window, above a long skirt of pale violet-coloured cloth. Her hair still parted above her forehead, was twisted up into a loose knot at the nape of her neck.

"I haven't kept you very long, have I?" she said, as she advanced towards the table. "What have we got for breakfast?" She lifted the cover of one of the dishes. "Buttered eggs, Toby. Help them, do, while I pour the coffee. I'm starving, aren't you?"

"Oh, I don't know," he returned, obeying her request. He felt all at once horribly nervous, hot and cold by turns, like a boy who contemplates his first proposal.

They sat down and began the meal, while she kept up a flow of the old airy nonsense, a somewhat one-sided conversation, punctuated by laughter.

"You're rather morose this morning, Toby," she said abruptly. "What's the matter? Liver?" Her tone was quizzical, but the expressive eyes held a faint anxiety.

"No," he returned. "Am I? I'm sorry."

A silence ensued.

Then, from the other side of the closed door there sounded a little yelp of canine entreaty, and the scratching of a little paw on the woodwork.

Pia laughed. "That's Cachou, asking to come in, poor darling."

Hawe rose to open the door, and the small brown Pom entered joyfully and ran to his mistress, who picked him up on to her lap.

"Dearest baby! Did he think his mummy had forgotten him? Isn't he sweet, Toby? And so clever, for such a mite."

As she fondled and caressed her pet, an insane jealousy invaded Hawe's mind. Across his memory drifted a phrase that he heard long since—

"All that I have to love in the world—Cachou, a little dog!"

He felt suddenly rather breathless, as he advanced to Pia's side. She looked up at him, smiling softly.

"I've been teaching him lately to shake hands. He is so bright. See. Give a paw, Cachou. That's right, that's the way to say good morning to mummy. Now, give a paw to uncle Toby, just to show him what a clever dog you are."

But Hawe's hands were thrust, clenched, into his pockets, and now he spoke very slowly and incisively, with no sense of the absurdity of his words.

"I can't be a partner in Cachou's deception. You're teaching him wrong. I won't be regarded as an uncle."

Pia giggled and screwed up her eyes.

"Won't you, really? You ought to consider it an honour. Isn't he rude, Cachou? What shall we call him, then? Big brother? Grandpapa——"

Hawe interrupted the nonsense, by gently removing the dog from Pia's lap and placing him on the floor.

"Neither big brother nor grandpapa," he said, and stopped short, feeling a fool.

"Well, upon my word!" she exclaimed, with a little gasp of amusement. She turned in her chair and regarded him with comically-lifted brows. "May I ask, then, what relation you *would* like to hold towards Cachou?"

"It has nothing to do with Cachou," he returned in the sharp tone of agitation. "It concerns you."

"Me?"

"Yes. We've been playing a game too long, Pia." He watched her face intently. Over it now there slowly crept a wave of colour.

"I don't quite understand—" she began, in a low voice.

"Yes," he said quickly; "yes, you understand." He had advanced a step, and, looking down on her bent head, "you understand," he repeated; "you know as well as I do that I am not your brother, that, in fact, at present, no tangible relationship exists between us. To me—to me," his voice broke and became husky,

"you have been, indeed, mother, sister, friend; but now, that's not enough. There can only be one bond between us." He laid his hand on the arm of her chair to try and stay its trembling, and spoke her name.

"Pia! oh, Pia!"

Suddenly his self-control forsook him. He fell on his knees, and, laying an arm across her lap, hid his face. From his lips came disjointed words, hoarsely muttered. "I love you, Pia, I love you."

Then, to his distraught nerves came the healing of her touch. She had laid her hands, as though in benediction, on his head.

"Oh, Sidney!" she whispered.

He dared to look up into her face.

"You will marry me—*me*?" There was a world of self-abasement in his tone. "Soon?" he went on. "I want you so. I can't wait. I have waited so long. Ten years—more. Nothing has counted in between."

One of her hands had dropped to his shoulder; the other hid her eyes.

He pulled both from their positions, and imprisoned them in his strong grasp.

"Say, Pia?"

Her body was bent towards him. Behind her hair the morning sunshine made an aureole, and her face was that of a saint glorified.

"Yes," she said. "Oh, yes. Didn't you know, my dear? I've always been yours."

Her tone was quiet, even soothing in its effects. In self-sacrifice she had attained a peace beyond his knowledge.

He, kissing her hands, could only breathe a voiceless prayer of worship.

But she, above him, could smile very tenderly, very wisely, and could speak her thought.

"Dear, you shall take me away, away from all the sham and the make-believe amongst which we've lived. I want something freer, something simpler. We'll go out and away to the wilds, back to your beautiful prairie land in the West. And there we'll find work, and

interest, and the real life, the only life worth living. You'll take me, won't you, my man?"

While she spoke, the window that Hawe had insecurely fastened before breakfast, blew open. Through it, with the brighter ray of sunlight that entered, there came a breath of cold, fresh air, redolent of the pine wood, filled with the subtle sense of life.

The breeze touched Hawe's forehead, and he lifted and threw back his head to meet its caress.

"Oh, Pia!" he said, and his tone was almost boyish, and held a great enthusiasm; "how we will *live*, out there, together, you and I!"

THE END.





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